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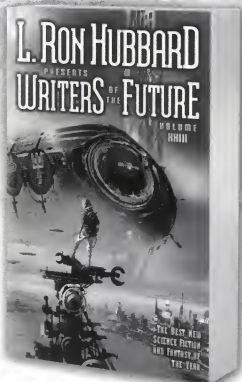
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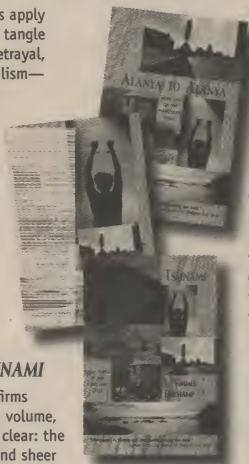
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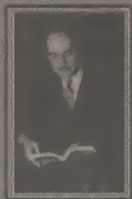


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REVISITING APOLLO 8

In our February 2007 issue, Kristine Kathryn Rusch revisited the Apollo 8 mission of 1968 and imagined a catastrophic development that never happened in our own timeline. Staying close to our own history, she crewed the space ship with the same astronauts. As we know, our astronauts survived this flight and are still alive today. In Kris's work of fiction, though, the outcome is different. Apollo 8 and its brave crew are lost. The story celebrates the courage of the early space explorers. It also imagines a way in which this tragedy changes and revitalizes the space program.

Reader reaction to this story was mostly enthusiastic. Jack McDevitt wrote to say, "Kris Rusch's novella in the February issue is one of the two or three best pieces of short fiction I've seen this year. Magnificent." Others described it as science fiction at its finest.

Not every reader agreed, however. Richard Wallace, MD, poignantly described his own feelings about the story.

I am upset and concerned after listening to/reading Kristine Kathryn Rusch's novella, "Recovering Apollo 8." Suddenly, I must imagine a hero from my youth in a story where his major accomplishment is his untimely death. Why use such a macabre plot device to drive a story of one man's obsession. Was the crew of Apollo 8 or their families contacted by the author or your editorial

staff before publishing this "speculative fiction"? The odd feeling in my gut came when my fourteen-year-old who listens to these tapes with me asked if I remembered when these men died. I have read and enjoyed the standard alternate history tales before, but I never remember using subjects who are still alive and remarkable.

This letter seems to bring up several questions. Is it all right to use living people in a work of fiction? Is it okay to kill them off? Will spinning tales about real people affect how they are remembered and is that memory or false reputation something writers and editors should be held accountable for? I'm not going to make an attempt here to offer universal answers to this question. I'm just offering my own thoughts on them as they pertain to Kris's story.

Legally, of course, there's no issue. The event was a public one, the astronauts are public figures. In addition, "Recovering Apollo 8" is clearly a work of fiction. It doesn't claim to tell the true story. Professional writers do their best to get as many facts right as possible, but they are also professional liars. It's their job to tangle us up in the webs that they weave. The departure from the truth is often the beginning of the story. Kris Rusch was not writing a documentary about what happened to Apollo 8. She was writing a story about what didn't happen.

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Is it wrong to imagine that the crew died? Their death is an inevitable result of the events in the story. Kris could have come up with a new crew. That might have been hard to do convincingly, though, in a story that otherwise stays so close to the historical record. But, should she have considered the feelings of the real people and their families? Kris handles the situation tactfully. The astronauts are not shown. Their behavior is a matter of conjecture, but their actions are as brave as I'm sure they would have been if they'd been placed in this situation. These actions seem to be in agreement with the fortitude and training that it takes to be an astronaut. The real crew has been back on terra firma for a long time now. Surely the worst time for their families must have been the anticipation beforehand and the wait for them to arrive home. It's hard to imagine that any anxiety engendered by reading "Recovering Apollo 8" could compete with the real thing.

Dr. Wallace's letter obviously gave me a lot to think about. It also instigated an interesting dinner discussion with my own thirteen-year-old. I brought up my day at work and the letter writer's concerns. My daughter had never before heard of the Apollo 8. Before that night's dinner conversation,

the only astronaut she could name was Neil Armstrong. She still might not be able to name the crew, but at least she knows about the mission. If she reads the story, I'm sure that the names Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders will stick with her longer than if she came upon them in a history book. I imagine that Dr. Wallace set his child straight about the fate of the Apollo 8's crew. I hope they had a terrific conversation about the mission and the heroes of his youth. Perhaps it was a conversation that might never have occurred if they hadn't read the story.

Should *Asimov's* editors and authors be worried about spreading disinformation? We all know our heads are filled with false facts, Johnny Appleseed didn't walk around with a saucepan on his head, George Washington didn't chop down his father's cherry tree, and Bill Gates never claimed that "640K ought to be enough for anybody. . . ." I don't believe that it is the fiction writers' responsibility to untangle all the facts from the tall tale. The writer's job is to entertain us, and possibly to make us think about what is and what isn't, what was and what could be. Thankfully for *Asimov's*, this is a job that Kristine Kathryn Rusch, like so many of our other authors, is very good at, indeed. ○

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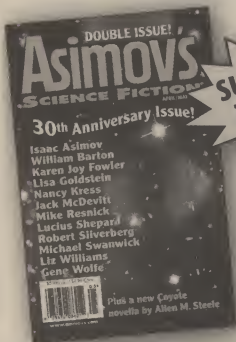
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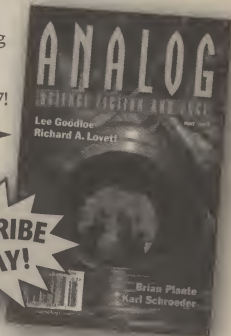
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REREADING HEINLEIN

The summer of 2007 saw the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Robert A. Heinlein's birth—an event well worth celebrating for those of us who love science fiction, because Heinlein is the writer from whom all that is significant in modern science fiction descends. It behooves me, therefore, to take a look at Heinlein next in this ongoing series of rereadings of science fiction classics, and the book of his that I've chosen to revisit is one of his earliest—*Beyond This Horizon*, his third novel. It was first published in the April and May 1942 issues of *Astounding Science Fiction* and is still in print in book form.

Heinlein was so prolific back then at the beginning of his career that he needed to put a pseudonym, "Anson MacDonald," on *Beyond This Horizon* so that it wouldn't seem to the readers of *Astounding* that one man was writing the entire magazine. He made his debut there in 1939 with two short stories, and then his fiction was present in six 1940 issues, eight of the twelve 1941 issues (with two serialized novels and eight short stories), and four 1942 issues before he went off to do military research in World War II. By the time *Beyond This Horizon* appeared, his distinctive writing style must have been so familiar to *Astounding's* readers that no one could have failed to recognize the Heinlein touch behind the "Anson MacDonald" false whiskers.

These are the novel's astonishing opening lines:

Hamilton Felix let himself off at the thirteenth level of the Department of Finance, mounted a slideway to the left, and stepped off the strip at a door marked:

BUREAU OF ECONOMIC
STATISTICS
Office of Analysis and
Prediction
Director
PRIVATE

He punched the door with a code combination, and awaited face check. It came properly, the door dilated, and a voice inside said, "Come in, Felix."

What is so astonishing about that passage, which must seem to modern readers as though anybody could have written it, is that no one had ever written science fiction like that before. *Mounted a slide-way*. Heinlein doesn't describe it. He just tells you that that's how you move around in the future. *Awaited face check*. The door is scanning people. *The door dilated*. It didn't simply open; it *dilated*. So we know that we are in a future where iris-aperture doors are standard items. And we are only a dozen lines or so into the world of *Beyond This Horizon*.

In an essay on Heinlein that I wrote on the occasion of his death at the age of seventy-nine, in 1988, I said this, which needs no rephras-

ing now, about the way Heinlein wrote:

In one flabbergasting two-year outpouring of material for a single magazine, Heinlein had completely reconstructed the nature of science fiction, just as in the field of general modern fiction Ernest Hemingway, in the 1920s, had redefined the modern novel. No one who has written fiction since 1927 or so can fail to take into account Hemingway's theory and practice without seeming archaic or impossibly naïve; no one since 1941 has written first-rate science fiction without a comprehension of the theoretical and practical example set by Heinlein.

The nature of his accomplishment was manifold. His underlying conceptual structures were strikingly intelligent, rooted in an engineer's appreciation of the way things really work. His narrative method was brisk, efficient, and lucid. His stories were stocked with recognizable human beings rather than the stereotypes of the mad-scientist era. And—his main achievement—he did

away with the lengthy footnotes of the Gernsback school and the clumsy, apologetic expository inserts of the pulp-magazine hacks and found an entirely new way to communicate the essence of the unfamiliar worlds in which his characters had to operate. Instead of pausing to explain, he simply thrust character and reader alike into those worlds and *let communication happen through experience*. He didn't need to tell us how his future societies worked or what their gadgets did. We saw the gadgets functioning; we saw the societies operating at their normal daily levels. And we figured things out as we went along, because Heinlein had left us no choice.

Hence that sideway. Hence that dilating door. We all write that way today. But no one had written like that before Heinlein.

Beyond This Horizon is short, as novels go—sixty thousand words or so. It covers an amazing amount of thematic ground: a society built on mandatory eugenic manipulation that enforces civility in daily life by legal and ritualized duels with hand

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weapons, plus an examination of how telepathy works, plus the search for the meaning and purpose of life, plus the exploration of a post-capitalistic non-socialist economic system, and much more. About five pages into the book Heinlein shows us—in 1942!—a computer collecting and processing economic data so that production and consumption can best be balanced by the bureaucracy in charge of such matters. (“All of these symbols, the kind that jingle and the kind that fold and, most certainly, the kind that are only abstractions from the signed promise of an honest man . . . passed through the bottle neck formed by Monroe-Alpha’s computer, and appeared there in terms of angular speeds, settings of three-dimensional cams, electronic flow, voltage biases, *et complex cetera*. The manifold constitutes a dynamic abstracted structural picture of the economic flow of a hemisphere.”) This is followed by a quick trip through the futuristic economic system and then a demonstration of how that archaic weapon, the Colt .45 pistol, worked. All this in the first half-dozen pages.

A few pages later, just in passing, Heinlein invents the waterbed. (“The water rose gently under the skin of the mattress until he floated, dry and warm and snug.”) And we see the way legitimized dueling serves to maintain common courtesy. (“An armed society is a polite society. Manners are good when one may have to back up his acts with his life.”) Anyone who was driving the Los Angeles freeways in the early 1980s, when angry drivers were likely to express their displeasure with pistol-shots, will understand that principle. Blasting away at drivers who annoy you is not the best

way to encourage safe driving, perhaps, but the fad, while it lasted, did tend to make everyone extremely aware of the rules of the road. Heinlein saw that forty years before.

Beyond This Horizon, short as it is, is a sprawling, chaotic novel. By the usual conventions of plot construction it’s downright disorganized. (The first two thirds of the book, covering perhaps a couple of months, deal with the attempt by government eugenicists to convince the superman-protagonist that he really ought to pass his superior genes along to the next generation. Then, after a brief and strikingly clumsy depiction of a failed revolution against that government, the final third of the story takes five years to show the protagonist marrying, siring two superchildren, and involving himself in a project that seeks to determine whether there is life after death.)

Flaws in narrative technique abound. A man who has been in suspended animation since 1926 is brought back to life, and one expects Heinlein to use him the way Huxley used the character known as the Savage in *Brave New World*, a foil against which the special features of his futuristic utopia can be more clearly depicted. But in fact Heinlein does almost nothing with him, forgetting him for nearly a hundred pages and then bringing him back in the most perfunctory way. There are sudden shifts in viewpoint, too. Crucial scenes take place off stage. Coincidences coincide. *Et cetera*, *et cetera*.

One can explain this odd excuse for conventional narrative method by saying that Heinlein in the fourth year of his career was still a novice writer who didn’t really

know what he was doing. Maybe so: no doubt that his plotting skills would improve vastly over the decades, as a glance at such mature work as 1966's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* will prove. But I think that's too glib a dismissal. What is going on in *Beyond This Horizon*, I believe, is that Heinlein's basic intention is to take us on a tour of a fascinating future society built out of many of his own libertarian social concepts, and he does it by putting his characters through the rudiments of a standard pulp-magazine story, just well enough constructed so that we move willingly through event after event toward some understanding of what his future world is all about. He was concerned, in all his novels, with the Big Issues: How can we construct a workable commonwealth? How must we conduct ourselves within such a society? Why, for that matter, are we alive at all? His novels are moral parables. He asks the same sort of hard questions that Socrates did, couching them in the form of

science fiction rather than as philosophical dialogues. And he holds us, as did Socrates, through his personal charm, through the clean lines of his efficient unfancy prose, and through the sparkle of his ideas—not through the tightness of any kind of unified plot.

It's a lively book. It's a funny book. It's not a perfect book. But it captured my attention just as firmly now as it did when I first read it more than half a century ago. It's pure Heinlein, the real thing in one of its earliest incarnations. As I wrote soon after his death, he was "a great writer, an extraordinary man, a figure of high nobility; there was no one else remotely like him in our field." *Beyond This Horizon*, for all its quaintnesses of style and its flaws of plotting and its occasional outmoded social assumptions (the absurd boy-meets-girl sequences are stunning examples of that), nevertheless shows why so many of us still revere both the man and his work. ○

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ALL SEATED ON THE GROUND

Connie Willis

Connie Willis first appeared in *Asimov's* in 1982 with two award-winning stories: "Fire Watch" and "A Letter from the Clearys," and she's been an *Asimov's* writer (and award winner) ever since, with such stories as "Even the Queen" (April 1992), "The Last of the Winnebagos" (July 1988), and "The Winds of Marble Arch" (October/November 1999). She's also written a number of Christmas stories for us, including this one about aliens, Christmas carols, Victoria's Secret, and church choirs. She's an expert on that last topic, having sung in church choirs, learned all the verses to "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night" and "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," and chaperoned middle-school choirs on more trips to the mall than she likes to remember. Connie's most recent collection, *The Winds of Marble Arch and Other Stories*, was published by Subterranean Press last August. She is currently at work on her next novel, *All Clear*.

I'd always said that if and when the aliens actually landed, it would be a let-down. I mean, after *War of the Worlds*, *Close Encounters*, and *E.T.*, there was no way they could live up to the image in the public's mind, good or bad.

I'd also said that they would look nothing like the aliens of the movies, and that they would *not* have come to A) kill us, B) take over our planet

and enslave us, C) save us from ourselves à la *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or D) have sex with Earthwomen. I mean, I realize it's hard to find someone nice, but would aliens really come thousands of light-years just to find a date? Plus, it seemed just as likely they'd be attracted to wart hogs. Or yucca. Or air-conditioning units.

I've also always thought A) and B) were highly unlikely since imperialist invader types would probably be too busy invading their next-door neighbors and being invaded by other invader types to have time to go after an out-of-the-way place like Earth, and as to C), I'm wary of people or aliens who say they've come to save you, as witness Reverend Thresher. And it seemed to me that aliens who were capable of building the spaceships necessary to cross all those light-years would necessarily have complex civilizations and therefore motives for coming more complicated than merely incinerating Washington or phoning home.

What had *never* occurred to me was that the aliens would arrive, and we still wouldn't know what those motives were after almost nine months of talking to them.

Now I'm not talking about an arrival where the UFO swoops down in the Southwest in the middle of nowhere, mutilates a few cows, makes a crop circle or two, abducts an *extremely* unreliable and unintelligent-sounding person, probes them in embarrassing places, and takes off again. I'd never believed the aliens would do that either, and they didn't, although they did land in the southwest, sort of.

They landed their spaceship in Denver, in the middle of the DU campus, and marched—well, actually marched is the wrong word; the Altairi's method of locomotion is somewhere between a glide and a waddle—straight up to the front door of University Hall in classic "Take me to your leader" fashion.

And that was it. They (there were six of them) didn't say, "Take us to your leader!" or "One small step for aliens, one giant leap for alienkind," or even, "Earthmen, hand over your females." Or your planet. They just stood there.

And stood there. Police cars surrounded them, lights flashing. TV news crews and reporters pointed cameras at them. F-16's roared overhead, snapping pictures of their spaceship and trying to determine whether A) it had a force field, or B) weaponry, and C) they could blow it up (they couldn't). Half the city fled to the mountains in terror, creating an enormous traffic jam on I-70, and the other half drove by the campus to see what was going on, creating an enormous traffic jam on Evans.

The aliens, who by now had been dubbed the Altairi because an astronomy professor at DU had announced they were from the star Altair in the constellation Aquila (they weren't), didn't react to any of this, which apparently convinced the president of DU they weren't going to blow up the place à la *Independence Day*. He came out and welcomed them to Earth and to DU.

They continued to stand there. The mayor came and welcomed them to Earth and to Denver. The governor came and welcomed them to Earth and to Colorado, assured everyone it was perfectly safe to visit the state, and implied the Altairi were just the latest in a long line of tourists who had come from all over to see the magnificent Rockies, though that seemed

unlikely since they were facing the other way, and they didn't turn around, even when the governor walked past them to point at Pike's Peak. They just stood there, facing University Hall.

They continued to stand there for the next three weeks, through an endless series of welcoming speeches by scientists, State Department officials, foreign dignitaries, and church and business leaders, and an assortment of weather, including a late April snowstorm that broke branches and power lines. If it hadn't been for the expressions on their faces, everybody would have assumed the Altairi were plants.

But no plant ever glared like that. It was a look of utter, withering disapproval. The first time I saw it in person, I thought, oh, my God, it's Aunt Judith.

She was actually my father's aunt, and she used to come over once a month or so, dressed in a suit, a hat, and white gloves, and sit on the edge of a chair and glare at us, a glare that drove my mother into paroxysms of cleaning and baking whenever she found out Aunt Judith was coming. Not that Aunt Judith criticized Mom's housekeeping or her cooking. She didn't. She didn't even make a face when she sipped the coffee Mom served her or draw a white gloved finger along the mantelpiece, looking for dust. She didn't have to. Sitting there in stony silence while my mother desperately tried to make conversation, her entire manner indicated disapproval. It was perfectly clear from that glare of hers that she considered us untidy, ill-mannered, ignorant, and utterly beneath contempt.

Since she never said what it was that displeased her (except for the occasional, "Properly brought-up children do not speak unless spoken to"), my mother frantically polished silverware, baked petits four, wrestled my sister Tracy and me into starched pinafores and patent-leather shoes and ordered us to thank Aunt Judith nicely for our birthday presents (a card with a dollar bill in it), and scrubbed and dusted the entire house to within an inch of its life. She even redecorated the entire living room, but nothing did any good. Aunt Judith still radiated disdain.

It would wilt even the strongest person. My mother frequently had to lie down with a cold cloth on her forehead after a visit from Aunt Judith, and the Altairi had the same effect on the dignitaries and scientists and politicians who came to see them. After the first time, the governor refused to meet with them again, and the president, whose polls were already in the low twenties and who couldn't afford any more pictures of irate citizens, refused to meet with them at all.

Instead he appointed a bipartisan commission, consisting of representatives from the Pentagon, the State Department, Homeland Security, the House, the Senate, and FEMA, to study them and find a way to communicate with them, and then, after that was a bust, a second commission consisting of experts in astronomy, anthropology, exobiology, and communications, and then a third, consisting of whoever they were able to recruit and who had anything resembling a theory about the Altairi or how to communicate with them, which is where I come in. I'd written a series of newspaper columns on aliens both before and after the Altairi arrived. (I'd also written columns on tourists, driving-with-cellphones, the traffic on I-70, the difficulty of finding any nice men to date, and my Aunt Judith.)

I was recruited in late November to replace one of the language experts, who quit "to spend more time with his wife and family." I was picked by the chair of the commission, Dr. Morthman, (who clearly didn't realize that my columns were meant to be humorous), but it didn't matter, since he had no intention of listening to me, or to anyone else on the commission, which at that point consisted of three linguists, two anthropologists, a cosmologist, a meteorologist, a botanist (in case they were plants after all), experts in primate, avian, and insect behavior (in case they were one of the above), an Egyptologist (in case they turned out to have built the Pyramids), an animal psychic, an Air Force colonel, a JAG lawyer, an expert in foreign customs, an expert in non-verbal communications, a weapons expert, Dr. Morthman (who as far as I could see, wasn't an expert in anything), and, because of our proximity to Colorado Springs, the head of the One True Way Maxichurch, Reverend Thresher, who was convinced the Altairi were a herald of the End Times. "There is a reason God had them land here," he said. I wanted to ask him why, if that was the case, they hadn't landed in Colorado Springs, but he wasn't a good listener either.

The only progress these people and their predecessors had made by the time I joined the commission was to get the Altairi to follow them various places, like in out of the weather and into the various labs that had been set up in University Hall for studying them, although when I saw the videotapes, it wasn't at all clear they were responding to anything the commission said or did. It looked to me like following Dr. Morthman and the others was their own idea, particularly since at nine o'clock every night they turned and glided/waddled back outside and disappeared into their ship.

The first time they did that, everyone panicked, thinking they were leaving. "Aliens Depart. Are They Fed Up?" the evening news logo read, a conclusion which I felt was due to their effect on people rather than any solid evidence. I mean, they could have gone home to watch Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, but even after they re-emerged the next morning, the theory persisted that there was some sort of deadline, that if we didn't succeed in communicating with them within a fixed amount of time, the planet would be reduced to ash. Aunt Judith had always made me feel exactly the same way, that if I didn't measure up, I was toast.

But I never did measure up, and nothing in particular happened, except she stopped sending me birthday cards with a dollar in them, and I figured if the Altairi hadn't obliterated us after a few conversations with Reverend Thresher (he was constantly reading them passages from Scripture and trying to convert them), they weren't going to.

But it didn't look like they were going to tell us what they were doing here, either. The commission had tried speaking to them in nearly every language, including Farsi, Navajo code-talk, and Cockney slang. They had played them music, drummed, written out greetings, given them several Power Point presentations, text-messaged them, and showed them the Rosetta Stone. They'd also tried Ameslan and pantomime, though it was obvious the Altairi could hear. Whenever someone spoke to them or offered them a gift (or prayed over them), their expression of disapproval deepened to one of utter contempt. Just like Aunt Judith.

By the time I joined the commission, it had reached the same state of

desperation my mother had when she redecorated the living room and had decided to try to impress the Altairi by taking them to see the sights of Denver and Colorado, in the hope they'd react favorably.

"It won't work," I said. "My mother put up new drapes *and* wallpaper, and it didn't have any effect at all," but Dr. Morthman didn't listen.

We took them to the Denver Museum of Art and Rocky Mountain National Park and the Garden of the Gods and a Broncos game. They just stood there, sending out waves of disapproval.

Dr. Morthman was undeterred. "Tomorrow we'll take them to the Denver Zoo."

"Is that a good idea?" I asked. "I mean, I'd hate to give them ideas," but Dr. Morthman didn't listen.

Luckily, the Altairi didn't react to anything at the zoo, or to the Christmas lights at Civic Center or to the Nutcracker ballet. And then we went to the mall.

By that point, the commission had dwindled down to seventeen people (two of the linguists and the animal psychic had quit), but it was still a large enough group of observers that the Altairi ran the risk of being trampled in the crowd. Most of the members, however, had stopped going on the field trips, saying they were "pursuing alternate lines of research" that didn't require direct observation, which meant they couldn't stand to be glared at the whole way there and back in the van.

So the day we went to the mall, there were only Dr. Morthman, the aroma expert Dr. Wakamura, Reverend Thresher, and I. We didn't even have any press with us. When the Altairi'd first arrived, they were all over the TV networks and CNN, but after a few weeks of the aliens doing nothing, the networks had shifted to showing more exciting scenes from *Alien*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Men in Black II*, and then completely lost interest and gone back to Paris Hilton and stranded whales. The only photographer with us was Leo, the teenager Dr. Morthman had hired to videotape our outings, and as soon as we got inside the mall, he said, "Do you think it'd be okay if I ducked out to buy my girlfriend's Christmas present before we start filming? I mean, face it, they're just going to stand there."

He was right. The Altairi glide-waddled the length of several stores and then stopped, glaring impartially at The Sharper Image and Gap window displays and the crowds who stopped to gawk at the six of them and who then, intimidated by their expressions, averted their eyes and hurried on.

The mall was jammed with couples loaded down with shopping bags, parents pushing strollers, children, and a mob of middle-school girls in green choir robes apparently waiting to sing. The malls invited school and church choirs to come and perform this time of year in the food court. The girls were giggling and chattering, a toddler was shrieking, "I don't *want* to!", Julie Andrews was singing *Joy to the World* on the piped-in Muzak, and Reverend Thresher was pointing at the panty-, bra-, and wing-clad mannequins in the window of Victoria's Secret and saying, "Look at that! Sinful!"

"This way," Dr. Morthman, ahead of the Altairi, said, waving his arm like the leader of a wagon train. "I want them to see Santa Claus," and I stepped to the side to get around a trio of teenage boys walking side by side who'd cut me off from the Altairi.

There was a sudden gasp, and the mall went quiet except for the Muzak. "What—?" Dr. Morthman said sharply, and I pushed past the teenage boys to see what had happened.

The Altairi were sitting calmly in the middle of the space between the stores, glaring. Fascinated shoppers had formed a circle around them, and a man in a suit who looked like the manager of the mall was hurrying up, demanding, "What's going on here?"

"This is wonderful," Dr. Morthman said. "I knew they'd respond if we just took them enough places." He turned to me. "You were behind them, Miss Yates. What made them sit down?"

"I don't know," I said. "I couldn't see them from where I was. Did—?"

"Go find Leo," he ordered. "He'll have it on tape."

I wasn't so sure of that, but I went to look for him. He was just coming out of Victoria's Secret, carrying a small bright pink bag. "Meg, what happened?" he asked.

"The Altairi sat down," I said.

"Why?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. I take it you weren't filming them?"

"No, I told you, I had to buy my girlfriend—jeez, Dr. Morthman will kill me." He jammed the pink bag in his jeans pocket. "I didn't think—"

"Well, start filming now," I said, "and I'll go see if I can find somebody who caught it on their cellphone camera." With all these people taking their kids to see Santa, there was bound to be someone with a camera. I started working my way around the circle of staring spectators, keeping away from Dr. Morthman, who was telling the mall manager he needed to cordon off this end of the mall and everyone in it.

"Everyone in it?" the manager gulped.

"Yes, it's essential. The Altairi are obviously responding to something they saw or heard—"

"Or smelled," Dr. Wakamura put in.

"And until we know what it was, we can't allow anyone to leave," Dr. Morthman said. "It's the key to our being able to communicate with them."

"But it's only two weeks till Christmas," the mall manager said. "I can't just shut off—"

"You obviously don't realize that the fate of the planet may be at stake," Dr. Morthman said.

I hoped not, especially since no one seemed to have caught the event on film, though they all had their cell phones out and pointed at the Altairi now, in spite of their glares. I looked across the circle, searching for a likely parent or grandparent who might have—

The choir. One of the girls' parents was bound to have brought a video-camera along. I hurried over to the troop of green-robed girls. "Excuse me," I said to them, "I'm with the Altairi—"

Mistake. The girls instantly began bombarding me with questions. "Why are they sitting down?"

"Why don't they talk?"

"Why are they always so mad?"

"Are we going to get to sing? We didn't get to sing yet."

"They said we had to stay here. How long? We're supposed to sing over at Flatirons Mall at six o'clock."

"Are they going to get inside us and pop out of our stomachs?"

"Did any of your parents bring a videocamera?" I tried to shout over their questions, and when that failed, "I need to talk to your choir director."

"Mr. Ledbetter?"

"Are you his girlfriend?"

"No," I said, trying to spot someone who looked like a choir director type. "Where is he?"

"Over there," one of them said, pointing at a tall, skinny man in slacks and a blazer. "Are you going out with Mr. Ledbetter?"

"No," I said, trying to work my way over to him.

"Why not? He's really nice."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No," I said as I reached him. "Mr. Ledbetter? I'm Meg Yates. I'm with the commission studying the Altairi—"

"You're just the person I want to talk to Meg," he said.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you how long it's going to be," I said. "The girls told me you have another singing engagement at six o'clock."

"We do, and I've got a rehearsal tonight, but that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about."

"She doesn't have a boyfriend, Mr. Ledbetter."

I took advantage of the interruption to say, "I was wondering if anyone with your choir happened to record what just happened on a videocamera or a—"

"Probably. Belinda," he said to the one who'd told him I didn't have a boyfriend, "go get your mother." She took off through the crowd. "Her mom started recording when we left the church. And if she didn't happen to catch it, Kaneesha's mom probably did. Or Chelsea's dad."

"Oh, thank goodness," I said. "Our cameraman didn't get it on film, and we need it to see what triggered their action."

"What made them sit down, you mean?" he said. "You don't need a video. I know what it was. The song."

"What song?" I said. "A choir wasn't singing when we came in, and anyway, the Altairi have already been exposed to music. They didn't react to it at all."

"What kind of music? Those notes from *Close Encounters*?"

"Yes," I said defensively, "and Beethoven and Debussy and Charles Ives. A whole assortment of composers."

"But instrumental music, not vocals, right? I'm talking about a song. One of the Christmas carols on the piped-in Muzak. I saw them sit down. They were definitely—"

"Mr. Ledbetter, you wanted my mom?" Belinda said, dragging over a large woman with a videocam.

"Yes," he said. "Mrs. Carlson, I need to see the video you shot of the choir today. From when we got to the mall."

She obligingly found the place and handed it to him. He fast-forwarded a minute. "Oh, good, you got it," he said, rewound, and held the camera so I could see the little screen. "Watch."

The screen showed the bus with "First Presbyterian Church" on its side, the girls getting off, the girls filing in the mall, the girls gathering in front of Crate and Barrel, giggling and chattering, though the sound was

too low to hear what they were saying. "Can you turn the volume up?" Mr. Ledbetter said to Mrs. Carlson, and she pushed a button.

The voices of the girls came on: "Mr. Ledbetter, can we go to the food court afterward for a pretzel?"

"Mr. Ledbetter, I don't want to stand next to Heidi."

"Mr. Ledbetter, I left my lip gloss on the bus."

"Mr. Ledbetter—"

The Altairi aren't going to be on this, I thought. Wait, there, past the green-robed girls, was Dr. Morthman and Leo with his videocamera and then the Altairi. They were just glimpses, though, not a clear view. "I'm afraid—" I said.

"Shh," Mr. Ledbetter said, pushing down on the volume button again, "listen."

He had cranked the volume all the way up. I could hear Reverend Thresher saying, "Look at that! It's absolutely disgusting!"

"Can you hear the Muzak, Meg?" Mr. Ledbetter asked.

"Sort of," I said. "What is that?"

"Joy to the World," he said, holding it so I could see. Mrs. Carlson must have moved to get a better shot of the Altairi because there was no one blocking the view of them as they followed Dr. Morthman. I tried to see if they were glaring at anything in particular—the strollers or the Christmas decorations or the Victoria's Secret mannequins or the sign for the restrooms—but if they were, I couldn't tell.

"This way," Dr. Morthman said on the tape, "I want them to see Santa Claus."

"Okay, it's right about here," Mr. Ledbetter said. "Listen."

"While shepherds watched . . ." the Muzak choir sang tinnily.

I could hear Reverend Thresher saying, "Blasphemous!" and one of the girls asking, "Mr. Ledbetter, after we sing can we go to McDonald's?" and the Altairi abruptly collapsed onto the floor with a floomphing motion, like a crinolined Scarlett O'Hara sitting down suddenly. "Did you hear what they were singing?" Mr. Ledbetter said.

"No—"

"All seated on the ground." Here," he said, rewinding. "Listen."

He played it again. I watched the Altairi, focusing on picking out the sound of the Muzak through the rest of the noise. "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," the choir sang, "all seated on the ground."

He was right. The Altairi sat down the instant the word "seated" ended. I looked at him.

"See?" he said happily. "The song said to sit down and they sat. I happened to notice it because I was singing along with the Muzak. It's a bad habit of mine. The girls tease me about it."

But why would the Altairi respond to the words in a Christmas carol when they hadn't responded to anything else we'd said to them over the last nine months? "Can I borrow this videotape?" I asked. "I need to show it to the rest of the commission."

"Sure," he said and asked Mrs. Carlson.

"I don't know," she said reluctantly. "I have tapes of every single one of Belinda's performances."

"She'll make a copy and get the original back to you," Mr. Ledbetter told her. "Isn't that right, Meg?"

"Yes," I said.

"Great," he said. "You can send the tape to me, and I'll see to it Belinda gets it. Will that work?" he asked Mrs. Carlson.

She nodded, popped the tape out, and handed it to me. "Thank you," I said and hurried back over to Dr. Morthman, who was still arguing with the mall manager.

"You can't just close the entire mall," the manager was saying. "This is the biggest profit period of the year—"

"Dr. Morthman," I said, "I have a tape here of the Altairi sitting down. It was taken by—"

"Not now," he said. "I need you to go tell Leo to film everything the Altairi might have seen."

"But he's taping the Altairi," I said. "What if they do something else?" but he wasn't listening.

"Tell him we need a video-record of everything they might have responded to, the stores, the shoppers, the Christmas decorations, everything. And then call the police department and tell them to cordon off the parking lot. Tell them no one's to leave."

"Cordon off—!" the mall manager said. "You can't hold all these people here!"

"All these people need to be moved out of this end of the mall and into an area where they can be questioned," Dr. Morthman said.

"Questioned?" the mall manager, almost apoplectic, said.

"Yes, one of them may have seen what triggered their action—"

"Someone did," I said. "I was just talking to—"

He wasn't listening. "We'll need names, contact information, and depositions from all of them," he said to the mall manager. "And they'll need to be tested for infectious diseases. The Altairi may be sitting down because they don't feel well."

"Dr. Morthman, they aren't sick," I said. "They—"

"Not now," he said. "Did you tell Leo?"

I gave up. "I'll do it now," I said and went over to where Leo was filming the Altairi and told him what Dr. Morthman wanted him to do.

"What if the Altairi do something?" he said, looking at them sitting there glaring. He sighed. "I suppose he's right. They don't look like they're going to move anytime soon." He swung his camera around and started filming the Victoria's Secret window. "How long do you think we'll be stuck here?"

I told him what Dr. Morthman had said.

"Jeez, he's going to question all these people?" he said, moving to the Williams-Sonoma window. "I had somewhere to go tonight."

All these people have somewhere to go tonight, I thought, looking at the crowd—mothers with babies in strollers, little kids, elderly couples, teenagers. Including fifty middle-school girls who were supposed to be at another performance an hour from now. And it wasn't the choir director's fault Dr. Morthman wouldn't listen.

"We'll need a room large enough to hold everyone," Dr. Morthman was

saying, "and adjoining rooms for interrogating them," and the mall manager was shouting, "This is a *mall*, not Guantanamo!"

I backed carefully away from Dr. Morthman and the mall manager and then worked my way through the crowd to where the choir director was standing, surrounded by his students. "But, Mr. Ledbetter," one of them was saying, "we'll come right back, and the pretzel place is right over there."

"Mr. Ledbetter, could I speak to you for a moment?" I said.

"Sure. Shoo," he said to the girls.

"But, Mr. Ledbetter—"

He ignored them. "What did the commission think of the Christmas carol theory?" he asked me.

"I haven't had a chance to ask them. Listen, in another five minutes they're going to lock down this entire mall."

"But I—"

"I know, you've got another performance and if you're going to leave, you'd better do it right now. I'd go that way," I said, pointing to the east door.

"Thank you," he said earnestly, "but won't you get into trouble—?"

"If I need your choir's depositions, I'll call you," I said. "What's your number?"

"Belinda, give me a pen and something to write on," he said. She handed him a pen and began rummaging in her backpack.

"Never mind," he said, "there isn't time." He grabbed my hand and wrote the number on my palm.

"You said we aren't allowed to write on ourselves," Belinda said.

"You're not," he said. "I really appreciate this, Meg."

"Go," I said, looking anxiously over at Dr. Morthman. If they didn't go in the next thirty seconds, they'd never make it, and there was no way he could round up fifty middle-school girls in that short a time. Or even make himself heard.

"Ladies," he said, and raised his hands, as if he were going to direct a choir. "Line up." And to my astonishment, they instantly obeyed him, forming themselves silently into a line and walking quickly toward the east door with no giggling, no "Mr. Ledbetter—?" My opinion of him went up sharply.

I pushed quickly back through the crowd to where Dr. Morthman and the mall manager were still arguing. Leo had moved farther down the mall to film the Verizon Wireless store and away from the east door. Good. I rejoined Dr. Morthman, moving to his right side so if he turned to look at me, he couldn't see the door.

"But what about *bathrooms*?" the manager was yelling. "The mall doesn't have nearly enough bathrooms for all these people."

The choir was nearly out the door. I watched till the last one disappeared, followed by Mr. Ledbetter.

"We'll get in portable toilets. Ms. Yates, arrange for Portapotties to be brought in," Dr. Morthman said, turning to me, and it was obvious he had no idea I'd ever been gone. "And get Homeland Security on the phone."

"Homeland Security!" the manager wailed. "Do you know what it'll do to business when the media gets hold—" He stopped and looked over at the crowd around the Altairi.

There was a collective gasp from them and then a hush. Someone must have turned the Muzak off at some point because there was no sound at all in the mall. "What—? Let me through," Dr. Morthman said, breaking the silence. He pushed his way through the circle of shoppers to see what was happening.

I followed in his wake. The Altairi were slowly standing up, a motion somewhat like a string being pulled taut. "Thank goodness," the mall manager said, sounding infinitely relieved. "Now that that's over, I assume I can reopen the mall."

Dr. Morthman shook his head. "This may be the prelude to another action, or the response to a second stimulus. Leo, I want to see the video of what was happening right before they began to stand up."

"I didn't get it," Leo said.

"Didn't get it?"

"You told me to tape the stuff in the mall," he said, but Dr. Morthman wasn't listening. He was watching the Altairi, who had turned around and were slowly glide-waddling back toward the east door.

"Go after them," he ordered Leo. "Don't let them out of your sight, and get it on tape this time." He turned to me. "You stay here and see if the mall has surveillance tapes. And get all these people's names and contact information in case we need to question them."

"Before you go, you need to know—"

"Not now. The Altairi are leaving. And there's no telling where they'll go next," he said, and took off after them. "See if anyone caught the incident on a videocamera."

As it turned out, the Altairi went only as far as the van we'd brought them to the mall in, where they waited, glaring, to be transported back to DU. When I got back, they were in the main lab with Dr. Wakamura. I'd been at the mall nearly four hours, taking down names and phone numbers from Christmas shoppers who said things like, "I've been here six hours with two toddlers. Six hours!" and "I'll have you know I missed my grandson's Christmas concert." I was glad I'd helped Mr. Ledbetter and his seventh-grade girls sneak out. They'd never have made it to the other mall in time.

When I was finished taking names and abuse, I went to ask the mall manager about surveillance tapes, expecting more abuse, but he was so glad to have his mall open again, he turned them over immediately. "Do these tapes have audio?" I asked him, and when he said no, "You wouldn't also have a tape of the Christmas music you play, would you?"

I was almost certain he wouldn't—Muzak is usually piped in—but to my surprise he said yes and handed over a CD. I stuck it and the tapes in my bag, drove back to DU and went to the main lab to find Dr. Morthman. I found Dr. Wakamura instead, squirting assorted food court smells—corn dog, popcorn, sushi—at the Altairi to see if any of them made them sit down. "I'm convinced they were responding to one of the mall's aromas," he said.

"Actually, I think they may have—"

"It's just a question of finding the right one," he said, squirting pizza at them. They glared.

"Where's Dr. Morthman?"

"Next door," he said, squirting essence of funnel cake. "He's meeting with the rest of the commission."

I winced and went next door. "We need to look at the floor coverings in the mall," Dr. Short was saying. "The Altairi may well have been responding to the difference between wood and stone."

"And we need to take air samples," Dr. Jarvis said. "They may have been responding to something poisonous to them in our atmosphere."

"Something poisonous?" Reverend Thresher said. "Something blasphemous, you mean! Angels in filthy underwear! The Altairi obviously refused to go any farther into that den of iniquity, and they sat down in protest. Even aliens know sin when they see it."

"I don't agree, Dr. Jarvis," Dr. Short said, ignoring Reverend Thresher. "Why would the air in the mall have a different composition from the air in a museum or a sports arena? We're looking for variables here. What about sounds? Could they be a factor?"

"Yes," I said. "The Altairi were—"

"Did you get the surveillance tapes, Miss Yates?" Dr. Morthman cut in. "Go through and cue them up to the point just before the Altairi sat down. I want to see what they were looking at."

"It wasn't what they were looking at," I said. "It was—"

"And call the mall and get samples of their floor coverings," he said. "You were saying, Dr. Short?"

I left the surveillance tapes and the lists of shoppers on Dr. Morthman's desk, and then went down to the audio lab, found a CD player, and listened to the songs: "Here Comes Santa Claus," "White Christmas," "Joy to the World"—

Here it was. "While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground, the angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around." Could the Altairi have thought the song was talking about the descent of their spaceship? Or were they responding to something else entirely, and the timing was simply coincidental?

There was only one way to find out. I went back to the main lab, where Dr. Wakamura was sticking lighted candles under the Altairi's noses. "Good grief, what is that?" I asked, wrinkling my nose.

"Bayberry magnolia," he said.

"It's awful."

"You should smell sandalwood violet," he said. "They were right next to Candle in the Wind when they sat down. They may have been responding to a scent from the store."

"Any response?" I said, thinking their expressions, for once, looked entirely appropriate.

"No, not even to spruce watermelon, which smelled *very* alien. Did Dr. Morthman find any clues on the security tapes?" he asked hopefully.

"He hasn't looked at them yet," I said. "When you're done here, I'll be glad to escort the Altairi back to their ship."

"Would you?" he said gratefully. "I'd really appreciate it. They look exactly like my mother-in-law. Can you take them now?"

"Yes," I said and went over to the Altairi and motioned them to follow me, hoping they wouldn't veer off and go back to their ship since it was nearly nine o'clock. They didn't. They followed me down the hall and into the audio lab. "I just want to try something," I said and played them "While Shepherds Watched."

"While shepherds watched their flocks," the choir sang. I watched the Altairi's unchanging faces. Mr. Ledbetter was wrong, I thought. They must have been responding to something else. They're not even listening.

"... by night, all seated ..."

The Altairi sat down.

I've got to call Mr. Ledbetter, I thought. I switched off the CD and punched in the number he'd written on my hand. "Hi, this is Calvin Ledbetter," his recorded voice said. "Sorry I can't come to the phone right now," and I remembered too late he'd said he had a rehearsal. "If you're calling about a rehearsal, the schedule is as follows: Thursday, Mile-High Women's Chorus, eight PM, Montview Methodist, Friday, chancel choir, eleven AM, First Presbyterian, Denver Symphony, two PM—" It was obvious he wasn't home. And that he was far too busy to worry about the Altairi.

I hung up and looked over at them. They were still sitting down, and it occurred to me that playing them the song might have been a bad idea, since I had no idea what had made them stand back up. It hadn't been the Muzak because it had been turned off, and if the stimulus had been something in the mall, we could be here all night. After a few minutes, though, they stood up, doing that odd pulled-string thing, and glared at me. "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," I said to them, "all seated on the ground."

They continued to stand.

"Seated on the ground," I repeated. "Seated. Sit!"

No response at all.

I played the song again. They sat down right on cue. Which still didn't prove they were doing what the words told them to do. They could be responding to the mere sound of singing. The mall had been noisy when they first walked in. "While Shepherds Watched" might have been the first song they'd been able to hear, and they'd sit down whenever they heard singing. I waited till they stood up again and then played the two preceding tracks. They didn't respond to Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas" or to Julie Andrews singing "Joy to the World." Or to the breaks between songs. There wasn't even any indication they were aware anyone was singing.

"While shepherds watched their flocks by-y night ... " the choir began. I tried to stay still and keep my face impassive, in case they were responding to nonverbal cues I was giving them. "... ah-all seated—"

They sat down at exactly the same place, so it was definitely those particular words. Or the voices singing them. Or the particular configuration of notes. Or the rhythm. Or the frequencies of the notes.

Whatever it was, I couldn't figure it out tonight. It was nearly ten o'clock. I needed to get the Altairi back to their spaceship. I waited for them to stand up and then led them, glaring, out to their ship, and went back to my apartment.

The message light on my answering machine was flashing. It was prob-

ably Dr. Morthman, wanting me to go back to the mall and take air samples. I hit play. "Hi, this is Mr. Ledbetter," the choir director's voice said. "From the mall, remember? I need to talk to you about something." He gave me his cell phone number and repeated his home phone, "in case it washed off. I should be home by eleven. Till then, whatever you do, *don't* let your alien guys listen to any more Christmas carols."

There was no answer at either of the numbers. He turns his cell phone off during rehearsals, I thought. I looked at my watch. It was ten-fifteen. I grabbed the yellow pages, looked up the address of Montview Methodist, and took off for the church, detouring past the Altairi's ship to make sure it was still there and hadn't begun sprouting guns from its ports or flashing ominous lights. It hadn't. It was its usual Sphinx-like self, which reassured me. A little.

It took me twenty minutes to reach the church. I hope rehearsal isn't over and I've missed him, I thought, but there were lots of cars in the parking lot, and light still shone though the stained-glass windows. The front doors, however, were locked.

I went around to the side door. It was unlocked, and I could hear singing from somewhere inside. I followed the sound down a darkened hall.

The song abruptly stopped, in the middle of a word. I waited a minute, listening, and when it didn't start up again, began trying doors. The first three were locked, but the fourth opened onto the sanctuary. The women's choir was up at the very front, facing Mr. Ledbetter, whose back was to me. "Top of page ten," he was saying.

Thank goodness he's still here, I thought, slipping in the back.

"From 'O hear the angel voices,'" he said, nodded to the organist, and raised his baton.

"Wait, where do we take a breath?" one of the women asked. "After 'voices'?"

"No, after divine,'" he said, consulting the music in front of him on the music stand, "and then at the bottom of page thirteen."

Another woman said, "Can you play the alto line for us? From 'fall on your knees'?"

This was obviously going to take a while, and I couldn't afford to wait. I started up the aisle toward them, and the entire choir looked up from their music and glared at me. Mr. Ledbetter turned around, and his face lit up. He turned to the women again, said, "I'll be right back," and sprinted down the aisle to me. "Meg," he said, reaching me. "Hi. What—?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I got your message, and—"

"You're not interrupting. Really. We were almost done anyway."

"What did you mean, don't play them any more Christmas carols? I didn't get your message till after I'd played them some of the other songs from the mall—"

"And what happened?"

"Nothing, but on your message you said—"

"Which songs?"

"'Joy to the World' and—"

"All four verses?"

"No, only two. That's all that were on the CD. The first one and the one about 'wonders of his love.'"

"One and four," he said, staring past me, his lips moving rapidly as if he were running through the lyrics. "Those should be okay—"

"What do you mean? Why did you leave that message?"

"Because if the Altairi were responding literally to the words in 'While Shepherds Watched,' Christmas carols are full of dangerous—"

"Dangerous—?"

"Yes. Look at 'We Three Kings of Orient Are.' You didn't play them that, did you?"

"No, just 'Joy to the World' and 'White Christmas.'"

"Mr. Ledbetter," one of the women called from the front of the church. "How long are you going to be?"

"I'll be right there," he said. He turned back to me. "How much of 'While Shepherds Watched' did you play them?"

"Just the part up to 'all seated on the ground.'"

"Not the other verses?"

"No. What—?"

"Mr. Ledbetter," the same woman said impatiently, "some of us have to leave."

"I'll be right there," he called to her, and to me, "Give me five minutes," and sprinted back up the aisle.

I sat down in a back pew, picked up a hymnal, and tried to find "We Three Kings." That was easier said than done. The hymns were numbered, but they didn't seem to be in any particular order. I turned to the back, looking for an index.

"But we still haven't gone over 'Saviour of the Heathen, Come,'" a young, pretty redhead said.

"We'll go over it Saturday night," Mr. Ledbetter said.

The index didn't tell me where "We Three Kings" was either. It had rows of numbers—5.6.6.5. and 8.8.7.D.—with a column of strange words below them—Laban, Hursley, Olive's Brow, Arizona—like some sort of code. Could the Altairi be responding to some sort of cipher embedded in the carol like in *The Da Vinci Code*? I hoped not.

"When are we supposed to be there?" the women were asking.

"Seven," Mr. Ledbetter said.

"But that won't give us enough time to run over 'Saviour of the Heathen Come,' will it?"

"And what about 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town'?" the redhead asked. "We don't have the second soprano part."

I abandoned the index and began looking through the hymns. If I couldn't figure out a simple hymnal, how could I hope to figure out a completely alien race's communications? If they were trying to communicate. They might have been sitting down to listen to the music, like you'd stop to look at a flower. Or maybe their feet just hurt.

"What kind of shoes are we supposed to wear?" the choir was asking.

"Comfortable," Mr. Ledbetter said. "You're going to be on your feet a long time."

I continued to search through the hymnal. Here was "What Child Is

This?" I had to be on the right track. "Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella . . ." It had to be here somewhere. "On Christmas Night, All People Sing—"

They were finally gathering up their things and leaving. "See you Saturday," he said, herding them out the door, all except for the pretty redhead, who buttonholed him at the door to say, "I was wondering if you could stay and go over the second soprano part with me again. It'll only take a few minutes."

"I can't tonight," he said. She turned and glared at me, and I knew *exactly* what that glare meant.

"Remind me and we'll run through it Saturday night," he said, shut the door on her, and sat down next to me. "Sorry, big performance Saturday. Now, about the aliens. Where were we?"

"We Three Kings.' You said the words were dangerous."

"Oh, right." He took the hymnal from me, flipped expertly to the right page, pointed. "Verse four. 'Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying'—I assume you don't want the Altairi locking themselves in a stone-cold tomb."

"No," I said fervently. "You said 'Joy to the World' was bad, too. What does it have in it?"

"Sorrow, sins, thorns infesting the ground."

"You think they're doing whatever the hymns tell them? That they're treating them like orders to be followed?"

"I don't know, but if they are, there are all kinds of things in Christmas carols you don't want them doing: running around on rooftops, bringing torches, killing babies—"

"Killing *babies*?" I said. "What carol is that in?"

"The Coventry Carol," he said flipping to another page. "The verse about Herod. See?" he pointed to the words. "'Charged he hath this day . . . all children young to slay.'"

"Oh, my gosh, that carol was one of the ones from the mall. It was on the CD," I said. "I'm so glad I came to see you."

"So am I," he said, and smiled at me.

"You asked me how much of 'While Shepherds Watched,' I'd played them," I said. "Is there child-slaying in that, too?"

"No, but verse two has got 'fear' and 'mighty dread' in it, and 'seized their troubled minds.'"

"I definitely don't want the Altairi to do that," I said, "but now I don't know *what* to do. We've been trying to establish communications with the Altairi for nine months, and that song was the first thing they've ever responded to. If I can't play them Christmas carols—"

"I didn't say that. We just need to make sure the ones you play them don't have any mayhem in them. You said you had a CD of the music they were playing in the mall?"

"Yes. That's what I played them."

"Mr. Ledbetter?" a voice said tentatively, and a balding man in a clerical collar leaned in the door. "How much longer will you be? I need to lock up."

"Oh, sorry, Reverend McIntyre," he said and stood up. "We'll get out of your way." He ran up the aisle, grabbed his music, and came back. "You'll be at the aches, right?" he said to Reverend McIntyre.

The aches? You must have misunderstood what he said, I thought.

"I'm not sure," Reverend McIntyre said. "My handle's pretty rusty."

Handle? What were they talking about?

"Especially 'The Hallelujah Chorus.' It's been years since I last sang it."

Oh, Handel, not handle.

"I'm rehearsing it with First Pres's choir at eleven tomorrow if you want to come and run through it with us."

"I just may do that."

"Great," Mr. Ledbetter said. "Good night." He led me out of the sanctuary. "Where's your car parked?"

"Out in front."

"Good. Mine, too." He opened the side door. "You can follow me to my apartment."

I had a sudden blinding vision of Aunt Judith glaring disapprovingly at me and saying, "A nice young lady *never* goes to a gentleman's apartment alone."

"You did say you brought the music from the mall with you, didn't you?" he asked.

Which is what you get for jumping to conclusions, I thought, following him to his apartment and wondering if he was going out with the red-headed second soprano.

"On the way over I was thinking about all this," he said when we got to his apartment building, "and I think the first thing we need to do is figure out exactly which element or elements of 'all seated on the ground' they're responding to, the notes—I know you said they'd been exposed to music before, but it could be this particular configuration of notes—or words."

I told him about reciting the lyrics to them.

"Okay, then, the next thing we do is see if it's the accompaniment," he said, unlocking the door. "Or the tempo. Or the key."

"The key?" I said, looking down at the keys in his hand.

"Yeah, have you ever seen *Jumpin' Jack Flash*?"

"No."

"Great movie. Whoopi Goldberg. In it, the key to the spy's code is the key. Literally. B flat. 'While Shepherds Watched' is in the key of C, but 'Joy to the World' is in D. That may be why they didn't respond to it. Or they may only respond to the sound of certain instruments. What Beethoven did they listen to?"

"The Ninth Symphony."

He frowned. "Then that's unlikely, but there might be a guitar or blocks or something in the 'While Shepherds Watched,' accompaniment. We'll see. Come on in," he said, opening the door and immediately vanishing into the bedroom. "There's soda in the fridge," he called back to me. "Go ahead and sit down."

That was easier said than done. The couch, chair, and coffee table were all covered with CDs, music, and clothes. "Sorry," he said, coming back in with a laptop. He set it down on top of a stack of books and moved a pile of laundry from the chair so I could sit down. "December's a bad month. And this year, in addition to my usual five thousand concerts and church services and cantata performances, I'm directing aches."

I hadn't misheard him before. "Aches?" I said.

"Yeah. A-C-H-E-S. The All-City Holiday Ecumenical Sing. ACHES. Or, as my seventh-grade girls call it, Aches and Pains. It's a giant concert—well, not actually a concert because everybody sings, even the audience. But all the city singing groups and church choirs participate." He moved a stack of LPs off the couch and onto the floor and sat down across from me. "Denver has it every year. At the convention center. Have you ever been to a Sing?" he said, and when I shook my head, "It's pretty impressive. Last year three thousand people and forty-four choirs participated."

"And you're directing?"

"Yeah. Actually, it's a much easier job than directing my church choirs. Or my seventh-grade girls' glee. And it's kind of fun. It used to be the All-City *Messiah*, you know, a whole bunch of people getting together to sing Handel's *Messiah*, but then they had a request from the Unitarians to include some Solstice songs, and it kind of snowballed from there. Now we do Hanukkah songs and 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' and 'The Seven Nights of Kwanzaa,' along with Christmas carols and selections from the *Messiah*. Which, by the way, we can't let the Altairi listen to either."

"Is there children-slaying in that, too?"

"Head-breaking. 'Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron,' and 'dash them in pieces.' There's also wounding, bruising, cutting, deriding, and laughing to scorn."

"Actually, the Altairi already know all about scorn," I said.

"But hopefully not about shaking nations. And covering the earth with darkness," he said. "Okay," he opened his laptop, "the first thing I'm going to do is scan in the song. Then I'll remove the accompaniment so we can play them just the vocals."

"What can I do?"

"You," he said, disappearing into the other room again and returning with a foot-high stack of sheet music and music books which he dumped in my lap, "can make a list of all the songs we don't want the Altairi to hear."

I nodded and started through *The Holly Jolly Book of Christmas Songs*. It was amazing how many carols, which I'd always thought were about peace and good will, had violent lyrics. "Coventry Carol" wasn't the only one with child-slaying in it. "Christmas Day is Come" did, too, along with references to sin, strife, and militants. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" had strife, too, and envy and quarrels. "The Holly and the Ivy" had bones, blood, and bears, and "Good King Wenceslas" talked about cruelty, bringing people flesh, freezing their blood, and heart failure.

"I had no idea Christmas carols were so grim," I said.

"You should hear Easter," Mr. Ledbetter said. "While you're looking, see if you can find any songs with the word 'seated' in them so we can see if it's the word they're responding to."

I nodded and went back to reading lyrics. In "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," everyone was standing, not seated, plus it had fear, trembling, and a line about giving oneself for heavenly food. "The First Noel" had "blood," and the shepherds were lying, not sitting.

What Christmas song has "seated" in it? I thought, trying to remember. Wasn't there something in "Jingle Bells" about Miss Somebody or other being seated by someone's side?

There was, and in "Wassail, Wassail," there was a line about a-sitting by the fire, but not "seated."

I kept looking. The non-religious Christmas songs were almost as bad as the carols. Even a children's song like "I'm Getting' Nuttin' for Christmas" gaily discussed smashing bats over people's heads, and there seemed to be an entire genre of "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer"-type songs: "Grandma's Killer Fruitcake," "I Came Upon a Roadkill Deer," and "Grandpa's Gonna Sue the Pants Off Santa."

And even when the lyrics weren't violent, they had phrases in them like "rule o'er all the earth" and "over us all to reign," which the Altairi might take as an invitation to global conquest.

There have to be some carols that are harmless, I thought, and looked up "Away in a Manger" in the index (which *The Holly Jolly Book*, unlike the hymnal, did have.) "... lay down his sweet head ... the stars in the sky ...". No mayhem here, I thought. I can definitely add this to the list. "Love ... blessings ... 'and take us to heaven to live with thee there." A harmless enough line, but it might mean something entirely different to the Altairi. I didn't want to find myself on a spaceship heading back to Aquila or wherever it was they came from.

We worked till almost three in the morning, by which time we had separate recordings of the vocals, accompaniment, and notes (played by Mr. Ledbetter on the piano, guitar, and flute and recorded by me) of "all seated on the ground," a list, albeit rather short, of songs the Altairi could safely hear, and another, even shorter list of ones with "seated," "sit," or "sitting" in them.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Ledbetter," I said, putting on my coat.

"Calvin," he said.

"Calvin. Anyway, thank you. I really appreciate this. I'll let you know the results of my playing the songs for them."

"Are you kidding, Meg?" he said. "I want to be there when you do this."

"But I thought—don't you have to rehearse with the choirs for your ACHES thing?" I said, remembering the heavy schedule he'd left on his answering machine.

"Yes, and I have to rehearse with the symphony, and with the chancel choir and the kindergarten choir and the handbell choir for the Christmas Eve service—"

"Oh, and I've kept you up so late," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"Choir directors never sleep in December," he said lightly, "and what I was going to say was that I'm free in between rehearsals and till eleven tomorrow morning. How early can you get the Altairi?"

"They usually come out of their ship around seven, but some of the other commission members may want to work with them."

"And face those bright shiny faces before they've had their coffee? My bet is you'll have the Altairi all to yourself."

He was probably right. I remembered Dr. Jarvis saying he had to work himself up to seeing the Altairi over the course of the day. "They look just like my fifth-grade teacher," he'd said.

"Are you sure you want to face them first thing in the morning?" I asked him. "The Altairi's glares—"

"Are nothing compared to the glare of a soprano who didn't get the solo

she wanted. Don't worry, I can handle the Altairi," he said. "I can't wait to find out what it is the Altairi are responding to."

What we found out was nothing.

Calvin had been right. There was no one else waiting outside University Hall when the Altairi appeared. I hustled them into the audio lab, locked the door, and called Calvin, and he came right over, bearing Starbucks coffee and an armload of CDs.

"Yikes!" he said when he saw the Altairi standing over by the speakers. "I was wrong about the soprano. This is more a seventh-grader's, 'No, you can't text-message during the choir concert, or wear face glitter,' glare."

I shook my head. "It's an Aunt Judith glare."

"I'm very glad we decided not to play them the part about dashing people's heads into pieces," he said. "Are you sure they didn't come to Earth to kill everybody?"

"No," I said. "That's why we have to establish communications with them."

"Right," he said, and proceeded to play the accompaniment we'd recorded the night before. Nothing, and nothing when he played the notes with piano, guitar, and flute, but when he played the vocal part by itself, the Altairi promptly sat down.

"Definitely the words," he said, and when we played them "Jingle Bells," they sat down again at "seated by my side," which seemed to confirm it.

But when he played them the first part of "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat," from *Guys and Dolls* and "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," they didn't sit down for either one.

"Which means it's the word 'seated,'" I said.

"Or they only respond to Christmas songs," he said. "Do you have some other carol we can play them?"

"Not with 'seated,'" I said. "'All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth,' has 'sitting' in it."

We played it for them. No response, but when he played "We Need A Little Christmas," from the musical *Mame*, the Altairi sat down the moment the recording reached the word "sitting."

Calvin cut off the rest of the phrase, since we didn't want Altairi sitting on our shoulders, and looked at me. "So why did they respond to this 'sitting' and not the one in 'All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth'?"

I was tempted to say, "Because 'All I Want for Christmas' is an absolutely terrible song," but I didn't. "The voices?" I suggested.

"Maybe," he said and shuffled through the CDs till he found a recording of the same song by the Statler Brothers. The Altairi sat down at exactly the same place.

So not the voices. And not Christmas. When Calvin played them the opening number from 1776, they sat down again as the Continental Congress sang orders to John Adams to "sit down." And it wasn't the verb "to sit." When we played them "The Hanukkah Song," they spun solemnly in place.

"Okay, so we've established it's ecumenical," Calvin said. "Thank goodness," I said, thinking of Reverend Thresher and what he'd say if he found out they'd responded to a Christmas carol, but when we played them a

Solstice song with the phrase, "the earth turns round again," they just stood there and glared.

"Words beginning with S?" I said.

"Maybe." He played them, in rapid succession, "The Snow Lay on the Ground," "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," and "Suzy Snowflake." Nothing.

At ten forty-five Calvin left to go to his choir rehearsal. "It's at First Presbyterian, if you want to meet me there at two," he said, "and we can go over to my apartment from there. I want to run an analysis on the frequency patterns of the phrases they responded to."

"Okay," I said, and delivered the Altairi to Dr. Wakamura, who wanted to squirt them with perfumes from the Crabtree and Evelyn store. I left them glaring at him and went up to Dr. Morthman's office. He wasn't there. "He went to the mall to collect paint samples," Dr. Jarvis said.

I called him on his cell phone. "Dr. Morthman, I've run some tests," I said, "and the Altairi are—"

"Not now. I'm waiting for an important call from the ACS," he said and hung up.

I went back to the audio lab and listened to the Cambridge Boys' Choir, Barbra Streisand, and Barenaked Ladies Christmas albums, trying to find songs with variations of "sit" and "spin" in them and no bloodshed. I also looked up instances of "turn." They hadn't responded to "turns" in the Solstice song, but I wasn't sure that proved anything. They hadn't responded to "sitting" in "All I Want for Christmas" either.

At two I went to meet Calvin at Trinity Episcopal. They weren't done rehearsing yet, and it didn't sound like they would be for some time. Calvin kept starting and stopping the choir and saying, "Basses, you're coming in two beats early, and altos, on 'singing,' that's an A flat. Let's take it again, from the top of page eight."

They went over the section four more times, with no discernible improvement, before Calvin said, "Okay, that's it. I'll see you all Saturday night."

"We are *never* going to get that entrance right," several of the choir members muttered as they gathered up their music, and the balding minister from the other night, Reverend McIntyre, looked totally discouraged.

"Maybe I shouldn't sing after all," he told Calvin.

"Yes, you should," Calvin said and put his hand on Reverend McIntyre's shoulder. "Don't worry. It'll all come together. You'll see."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked Calvin after Reverend McIntyre had gone out.

He laughed. "I know it's hard to believe listening to them now. I never think they're going to be able to do it, but somehow, no matter how awful they sound in rehearsal, they always manage to pull it off. It's enough to restore your faith in humanity." He frowned. "I thought you were going to come over, and we were going to look at frequency patterns."

"We are," I said. "Why?"

He pointed behind me. The Altairi were standing there with Reverend McIntyre. "I found them outside," he said, smiling. "I was afraid they might be lost."

"Oh, dear, they must have followed me. I'm so sorry," I said though he didn't seem particularly intimidated by them. I said as much.

"I'm not," he said. "They don't look nearly as annoyed as my congregation does when they don't approve of my sermon."

"I'd better take them back," I said to Calvin.

"No, as long as they're here, we might as well take them over to my apartment and try some more songs on them. We need more data."

I somehow squeezed all six of them into my car and took them over to Calvin's apartment, and he analyzed frequency patterns while I played some more songs for them. It definitely wasn't the quality of the songs or the singers they were responding to. They wouldn't sit down for Willie Nelson's "Pretty Paper" and then did for a hideous falsetto children's recording of "Little Miss Muffet" from the 1940s.

It wasn't the words' meaning, either. When I played them "*Adeste Fideles*" in Latin, they sat down when the choir sang, "*tibi sit gloria*."

"Which proves they're taking what they hear literally," Calvin said when I took him into the kitchen out of earshot of the Altairi to tell him.

"Yes, which means we've got to make sure they don't hear any words which have double meanings," I said. "We can't even play them 'Deck the Halls,' for fear they might deck someone."

"And we definitely can't play them 'laid in a manger,'" he said, grinning.

"It's not funny," I said. "At this rate, we aren't going to be able to play them *anything*."

"There must be some songs—"

"What?" I said in frustration. "'I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm,' has hearts on fire, 'Christmastide' might bring on a tsunami, and 'be born in us today' sounds like a scene out of *Alien*."

"I know," he said. "Don't worry, we'll find something. Here, I'll help you." He cleared off the kitchen table, brought in the stacks of sheet music, albums, and CDs, and sat me down across from him. "I'll find songs and you check the lyrics."

We started through them. "No . . . no . . . what about 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day'?"

"No," I said, looking up the lyrics. "It's got 'hate,' 'dead,' and 'despair.'"

"Cheery," he said. There was a pause while we looked through more music. "John Lennon's 'Happy Xmas?'"

I shook my head. "War,' also 'fights' and 'fear.'"

Another pause, and then he said, "'All I want for Christmas is you.'"

I looked up at him, startled. "What did you say?"

"'All I Want for Christmas Is You,'" he repeated. "Song title. Mariah Carey song."

"Oh." I looked up the lyrics. "I think it might be okay. I don't see any murder or mayhem," but he was shaking his head.

"On second thought, I don't think we'd better. Love can be even more dangerous than war."

I looked into the living room where the Altairi stood glaring through the door at me. "I seriously doubt they're here to steal Earthwomen."

"Yeah, but we wouldn't want to give anybody any ideas."

"No," I said. "We definitely wouldn't want to do that."

We went back to searching for songs. "How about 'I'll Be Home for Christmas'?" he said, holding up a Patti Page album.

"I'll Be Home" passed muster, but the Altairi didn't respond to it, or to Ed Ames singing "Ballad of the Christmas Donkey" or Miss Piggy singing "Santa Baby."

There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to their responses. The keys weren't the same, or the notes, or the voices. They responded to the Andrews Sisters, but not to Randy Travis, and it wasn't the voices either, because they responded to Julie Andrews' "Awake, Awake, Ye Drowsy Souls." When we played them her "Silver Bells," they didn't laugh (which didn't really surprise me) or bustle, but when the song got to the part about the traffic lights blinking red and green, all six of them blinked their eyes. Yet when we played them her, "Rise Up Shepherd, and Follow," they just sat there.

"Try her 'Christmas Waltz,'" I said, looking at the album cover.

He shook his head. "It's got love in it, too. You *did* say you didn't have a boyfriend, didn't you?"

"That's right," I said, "and I have no intention of dating the Altairi."

"Good," he said. "Can you think of any other songs with 'blink' in them?"

By the time he left to rehearse with the symphony, we didn't know any more than when we started. I took the Altairi back to Dr. Wakamura, who didn't seem all that happy to see them, tried to find a song with "blink" in it, to no avail, had lunch, and went back over to Calvin's apartment.

He was already there, working. I started through the sheet music. "What about 'Good Christian Men, Rejoice'?" I said. "It's got 'bow' in it," and the phone rang.

Calvin answered it. "What is it, Belinda?" he said, listened a moment, and then said, "Turn on the TV," and handed me the remote.

I switched on the television. Marvin the Martian was telling Bugs Bunny he planned to incinerate the earth. "CNN," Calvin said. "It's on forty."

I punched in the channel and then was sorry. Reverend Thresher was standing in the audio lab in front of a mob of reporters, saying, "—happy to announce that we have found the answer to the Altairi's actions in the mall two days ago. Christmas carols were playing over the sound system in the mall—"

"Oh, no," I said.

"I thought the surveillance tapes didn't have any sound," Calvin said.

"They don't. Someone else in the mall must have had a videocam."

"—and when the Altairi heard those holy songs," Reverend Thresher was saying, "they were overcome by the truth of their message, by the power of God's blessed word—"

"Oh, no," Calvin said.

"—and they sank to the ground in repentance for their sins."

"They did not," I said. "They sat down."

"For the past nine months, scientists have been seeking to discover the reason why the Altairi came to our planet. They should have turned to our Blessed Savior instead, for it is in Him that all answers lie. Why have the Altairi come here? To be saved! They've come to be born again, as we shall demonstrate." He held up a CD of Christmas carols.

"Oh, *no*!" we both said. I grabbed for my cell phone.

"Like the wise men of old," Reverend Thresher was saying, "they have

come seeking Christ, which proves that Christianity is the only true religion."

Dr. Morthman took forever to answer his phone. When he did, I said, "Dr. Morthman, you mustn't let the Altairi listen to any Christmas carols—"

"I can't talk now," he said. "We're in the middle of a press conference," and hung up.

"Dr. Morthman—" I hit redial.

"There's no time for that," Calvin, who'd snatched up his keys and my coat, said. "Come on, we'll take my car," and as we racketed downstairs, "There were a lot of reporters there, and he just said something that will make every Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Wiccan, and non-evangelical Christian on the planet go ballistic. If we're lucky, he'll still be answering questions when we get there."

"And if we're not?"

"The Altairi will be out seizing troubled minds, and we'll have a holy war on our hands."

We almost made it. There were, as Calvin had predicted, a *lot* of questions, particularly after Reverend Thresher stated that the Altairi agreed with him on abortion, gay marriage, and the necessity of electing Republicans to all political offices.

But the clamoring reporters clogging the steps, the door, and the hall made it nearly impossible to get through, and by the time we reached the audio lab, Reverend Thresher was pointing proudly to the Altairi kneeling on the other side of the one-way mirror and telling the reporters, "As you can see, their hearing the Christmas message has made them kneel in repentance—"

"Oh, no, they must be listening to 'O Holy Night,'" I said, "or 'As With Gladness Men of Old,'"

"What did you play them?" Calvin demanded. He pointed at the kneeling Altairi.

"The One True Way Maxichurch Christmas CD," Reverend Thresher said proudly, holding up the case, which the reporters obligingly snapped, filmed, and downloaded to their iPods. "*Christmas Carols for True Christians.*"

"No, no, what *song*?"

"Do the individual carols hold a special significance for them?" the reporters were shouting, and "What carol were they listening to in the mall?" and "Have they been baptized, Reverend Thresher?" while I tried to tell Dr. Morthman, "You've got to turn the music off."

"Off?" Dr. Morthman said, yelling to be heard over the reporters. "Just when we're finally making progress communicating with the Altairi?"

"You *have* to tell us which songs you've played!" Calvin shouted.

"Who are *you*?" Reverend Thresher demanded.

"He's with me," I said, and to Dr. Morthman, "You have to turn it off right now. Some of the carols are dangerous."

"*Dangerous?*" he bellowed, and the reporters' attention swiveled to us.

"What do you mean, dangerous?" they asked.

"I mean dangerous," Calvin said. "The Altairi aren't repenting of anything. They're—"

"How dare you accuse the Altairi of not being born again?" Reverend Thresher said. "I saw them respond to the hymnwriter's inspiring words with my own eyes, saw them fall on their knees—"

"They responded to 'Silver Bells,' too," I said, "and to 'The Hanukkah Song.'"

"The 'Hanukkah Song'?" the reporters said and began pelting us with questions again. "Does that mean they're Jewish?" "Orthodox or Reformed?" "What's their response to Hindu chants?" "What about the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Do they respond to that?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with religion," Calvin said. "The Altairi are responding to the literal meaning of certain words in the songs. Some of the words they're listening to right now could be dangerous—"

"Blasphemy!" Reverend Thresher bellowed. "How could the blessed Christmas message be dangerous?"

"'Christmas Day is Come,' tells them to slay young children," I said, "and the lyrics of other carols have blood and war and stars raining fire. That's why you've got to turn off the music right now."

"Too late," Calvin said and pointed through the one-way mirror.

The Altairi weren't there. "Where are they?" the reporters began shouting. "Where did they go?" and Reverend Thresher and Dr. Morthman both turned to me and demanded to know what I'd done with them.

"Leave her alone. She doesn't know where they are any more than you do," Calvin said in his choir director voice.

The effect on the room was the same as it had been on his seventh graders. Dr. Morthman let go of me, and the reporters shut up. "Now, what song were you playing?" Calvin said to Reverend Thresher.

"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," Reverend Thresher said, "but it's one of the oldest and most beloved Christmas carols. It's ridiculous to think hearing it could endanger anyone—"

"Is 'God Rest Ye' why they left?" the reporters were shouting, and "What are the words? Is there any war in it? Or children-slaying?"

"God rest ye merry, gentlemen," I muttered under my breath, trying to remember the lyrics, "let nothing you dismay. . . ."

"Where did they go?" the reporters clamored.

"... oh, tidings of comfort and joy," I murmured. I glanced over at Calvin. He was doing the same thing I was. "... to save us all ... when we are gone. . . ."

"Where do you think they've gone?" a reporter called out.

Calvin looked at me. "Astray," he said grimly.

The Altairi weren't in the other labs, in any of the other buildings on campus, or in their ship. Or at least no one had seen the ramp to it come down and them go inside. No one had seen them crossing the campus either, or on the surrounding streets.

"I hold you entirely responsible for this, Miss Yates," Dr. Morthman said. "Send out an APB," he told the police. "And put out a Megan Alert."

"That's for when a child's been kidnapped," I said. "The Altairi haven't—"

"We don't know that," he snapped. He turned back to the police officer. "And call the FBI."

The police officer turned to Calvin. "Dr. Morthman said you said the aliens were responding to the words, 'gone astray.' Were there any other words in the song that are dangerous?"

"Sa—" I began.

"No," Calvin said, and while Dr. Morthman was telling the officer to call Homeland Security and tell them to declare a Code Red, he hustled me down the sidewalk and behind the Altairi's ship.

"Why did you tell them that?" I demanded. "What about 'scorn'? What about 'Satan's power'?"

"Shh," he whispered. "He's already calling Homeland Security. We don't want him to call out the Air Force. And the nukes," he said. "And there's no time to explain things to them. We've got to find the Altairi."

"Do you have any idea where they could have gone?"

"No. At least their ship's still here," he said, looking over at it.

I wasn't sure that meant anything, considering the Altairi had been able to get out of a lab with a locked door. I said as much, and Calvin agreed.

"'Gone astray' may not even be what they were responding to. They may be off looking for a manger or shepherds. And there are different versions. *Christmas Carols for True Christians* may have used an older one."

"In which case we need to go back to the lab and find out exactly what it was they heard," I said, my heart sinking. Dr. Morthman was likely to have me arrested.

Apparently Calvin had reached the same conclusion because he said, "We can't go back in there. It's too risky, and we've got to find the Altairi before Reverend Thresher does. There's no telling what he'll play them next."

"But how—?"

"If they did go astray, then they may still be in the area. You go get your car and check the streets north of the campus, and I'll do south. Do you have your cell phone?"

"Yes, but I don't have a car. Mine's at your apartment. We came over in yours, remember?"

"What about the van you use to take the Altairi places in?"

"But won't that be awfully noticeable?"

"They're looking for six alien son of a bitches, not in a van," he said, "and besides, if you find them, you'll need something to put them in."

"You're right," I said and took off for the faculty parking lot, hoping Dr. Morthman hadn't had the same idea.

He hadn't. The parking lot was deserted. I slid the van's back door open, half-hoping this was the Altairi's idea of astray, but they weren't inside, or on any of the streets for an area two miles north of DU. I drove up University Boulevard and then slowly up and down the side streets, terrified I'd find them squished on the pavement.

It was starting to get dark. I called Calvin. "No sign of them," I told him. "Maybe they went back to the mall. I'm going to go over there and—"

"No, don't do that," he said. "Dr. Morthman and the FBI are there. I'm watching it on CNN. They're searching Victoria's Secret. Besides, the Altairi aren't there."

"How do you know?"

"Because they're here at my apartment."

"They are?" I said, weak with relief. "Where did you find them?"

He didn't answer me. "Don't take any major streets on your way over here," he said. "And park in the alley."

"Why? What have they done?" I asked, but he'd already hung up.

The Altairi were standing in the middle of Calvin's living room when I got there. "I came back here to check on alternate lyrics for 'God Rest Ye' and found them waiting for me," Calvin explained. "Did you park in the alley?"

"Yes, at the other end of the block. What have they done?" I repeated, almost afraid to ask.

"Nothing. At least nothing that's been on CNN," he said, gesturing at the TV, which was showing the police searching the candle store. He had the sound turned down, but across the bottom of the screen was the logo, "Aliens AWOL."

"Then why all the secrecy?"

"Because we can't afford to let them find the Altairi till we've figured out why they're doing what they're doing. Next time it might not be as harmless as going astray. And we can't go to your apartment. Morthman knows where you live. We're going to have to hole up here. Did you tell anybody you were working with me?"

I tried to think. I'd attempted to tell Dr. Morthman about Calvin when I got back from the mall, but I hadn't gotten far enough to tell him Calvin's name, and when Reverend Thresher had demanded, "Who are you?" all I'd said was, "He's with me."

"I didn't tell anybody your name," I said.

"Good," he said. "And I'm pretty sure nobody saw the Altairi coming here."

"But how can you be sure? Your neighbors—"

"Because the Altairi were waiting for me inside," he said. "Right where they are now. So either they can pick locks, walk through walls, or teleport. My money's on teleportation. And it's obvious the commission doesn't have any idea where they are," he said, pointing at the TV, where a mugshot-like photo of the Altairi was displayed, with "Have you seen these aliens?" and a phone number to call across their midsections. "And luckily, I went to the grocery store and stocked up the other day so I wouldn't have to go shopping in between all my concerts."

"Your concerts! And the All-City Sing! I forgot all about them," I said, stricken with guilt. "Weren't you supposed to have a rehearsal tonight?"

"I canceled it," he said, "and I can cancel the one tomorrow morning if I have to. The Sing's not till tomorrow night. We've got plenty of time to figure this out."

If they don't find us first, I thought, looking at the TV, where they were searching the food court. Once they realized they couldn't find the Altairi anywhere, they'd notice I was missing, too, and start looking for us. And the reporters today, unlike Leo, had all been videotaping. If they put Calvin's picture on TV with a number to call, one of his church choir members or his seventh graders would be certain to call in and identify him.

Which meant we'd better work fast. I picked up the list of songs and actions we'd compiled. "Where do you want to start?" I asked Calvin, who was going through a stack of LPs.

"Not with 'Frosty the Snowman,'" he said. "I don't think I can stand any more chasing here and there."

"How about, 'I Wonder as I Wander'?"

"Very funny," he said. "Since we know they respond to 'kneeling,' why don't we start with that?"

"Okay." We played them "fall on your knees" and "come adore on bended knee" and "whose forms are bending low," some of which they responded to and some of which they didn't, for no reason we could see.

"The First Noel' has 'full reverently upon their knee' in it," I said, and Calvin started toward the bedroom to look for it.

He stopped as he passed in front of the TV. "I think you'd better come look at this," he said and turned it up.

"The Altairi were not at the mall, as we had hoped," Dr. Morthman was saying, "and it has just come to our attention that a member of our commission is also missing, Margaret Yates." Video of the scene at the lab came on behind Dr. Morthman and the reporter, with me shouting for him to shut the music off. Any second a picture of Calvin would appear, demanding to know which carol they were playing.

I grabbed up my phone and called Dr. Morthman, hoping against hope they couldn't trace cell phone calls and that he'd answer even though he was on TV.

He did, and the camera blessedly zoomed in on him so only a tiny piece of the video remained visible. "Where are you calling from?" he demanded. "Did you find the Altairi?"

"No," I said, "but I think I have an idea where they might be."

"Where?" Dr. Morthman said.

"I don't think they've gone astray. I think they may be responding to one of the other words in the song. 'Rest' or possibly—"

"I knew it," Reverend Thresher said, shoving in front of Dr. Morthman. "They were responding to the words, 'Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.' They've gone to church. They're at the One True Way right this minute."

It wasn't what I had in mind, but at least a photo of the One True Way Maxichurch was better than one of Calvin. "That should give us at least two hours. His church is way down in Colorado Springs," I said, turning the TV back down. I went back to playing songs to the Altairi and logging their responses and non-responses, but half an hour later when Calvin went in the bedroom to look for a Louis Armstrong CD, he stopped in front of the TV again and frowned.

"What happened?" I said, dumping the pile of sheet music on my lap on the couch beside me and sidling past the Altairi to get to him. "Didn't they take the bait?"

"Oh, they took it, all right," he said and turned up the TV.

"We believe the Altairi are in Bethlehem," Dr. Morthman was saying. He was standing in front of a departures board at DIA.

"Bethlehem?" I said.

"It's mentioned in the lyrics twice," Calvin said. "At least if they're off in Israel it gives us more time."

"It also gives us an international incident," I said. "In the Middle East,

no less. I've got to call Dr. Morthman," but he must have turned his cell phone off, and I couldn't get through to the lab.

"You could call Reverend Thresher," Calvin said, pointing to the TV screen.

Reverend Thresher was surrounded by reporters as he got into his Lexus. "I'm on my way to the Altairi right now, and tonight we will hold a Praise Worship Service, and you'll be able to hear their Christian witness and the Christmas carols that first brought them to the Lord—"

Calvin switched the TV off. "It's a sixteen hour flight to Bethlehem," he said encouragingly. "It surely won't take us that long to figure this out."

The phone rang. Calvin shot me a glance and then picked it up. "Hello, Mr. Steinberg," he said. "Didn't you get my message? I canceled tonight's rehearsal." He listened awhile. "If you're worried about your entrance on page twelve, we'll run over it before the Sing." He listened some more. "It'll all come together. It always does."

I hoped that would be true of our solving the puzzle of the Altairi. If it wasn't, we'd be charged with kidnapping. Or starting a religious war. But both were better than letting Reverend Thresher play them "slowly dying" and "thorns infest the ground." Which meant we'd better figure out what the Altairi were responding to, and fast. We played them Dolly Parton and Manhattan Transfer and the Barbershop Choir of Toledo and Dean Martin.

Which was a bad idea. I'd had almost no sleep the last two days, and I found myself nodding off after the first few bars. I sat up straight and tried to concentrate on the Altairi, but it was no use. The next thing I knew, my head was on Calvin's shoulder, and he was saying, "Meg? Meg? Do the Altairi sleep?"

"Sleep?" I said, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. "I'm sorry, I must have dozed off. What time is it?"

"A little after four."

"In the *morning*?"

"Yes. Do the Altairi sleep?"

"Yes, at least we think so. Their brain patterns alter, and they don't respond to stimuli, but then again, they *never* respond."

"Are there visible signs that they're asleep? Do they close their eyes or lie down?"

"No, they sort of droop over, like flowers that haven't been watered. And their glares diminish a little. Why?"

"I have something I want to try. Go back to sleep."

"No, that's okay," I said, suppressing a yawn. "If anybody needs to sleep, it's you. I've kept you up the last two nights, and you've got to direct your Sing thing. I'll take over and you go—"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I told you, I never get any sleep this time of year."

"So what's this idea you want to try?"

"I want to play them the first verse of 'Silent Night.'"

"Sleep in heavenly peace," I said.

"Right, and no other action verbs, *and* I've got at least fifty versions of it. Johnny Cash, Kate Smith, Britney Spears—"

"Do we have time to play them fifty different versions?" I asked, looking over at the TV. A split screen showed a map of Israel and the outside of the One True Way Maxichurch. When I turned the volume up, a reporter's voice said, "Inside, thousands of members are awaiting the appearance of the Altairi, whom Reverend Thresher expects at any minute. A twenty-four hour High-Powered Prayer Vigil—"

I turned it back down. "I guess we do. You were saying?"

"'Silent Night' is a song everybody—Gene Autry, Madonna, Burl Ives—has recorded. Different voices, different accompaniments, different keys. We can see which versions they respond to—"

"And which ones they don't," I said, "and that may give us a clue to what they're responding to."

"Exactly," he said, opening a CD case. He stuck it in the player and hit Track 4. "Here goes."

The voice of Elvis Presley singing, "Silent night, holy night," filled the room. Calvin came back over to the couch and sat down next to me. When Elvis got to "tender and mild," we both leaned forward expectantly, watching the Altairi. "Sleep in heavenly peace," Elvis crooned, but the Altairi were still stiffly upright. They remained that way through the repeated "sleep in heavenly peace." And through Alvin the Chipmunks' solo of it. And Celine Dion's.

"Their glares don't appear to be diminishing," Calvin said. "If anything, they seem to be getting worse."

They were. "You'd better play them Judy Garland," I said.

He did, and Dolly Parton and Harry Belafonte. "What if they don't respond to any of them?" I asked.

"Then we try something else. I've also got twenty-six versions of 'Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.'" He grinned at me. "I'm kidding. I do, however, have nine different versions of 'Baby It's Cold Outside.'"

"For use on second sopranos?"

"No," he said. "Shh, I love this version. Nat King Cole."

I shh-ed and listened, wondering how the Altairi could resist falling asleep. Nat King Cole's voice was even more relaxing than Dean Martin's. I leaned back against the couch. "All is calm, all . . ."

I must have fallen asleep again because the next thing I knew the music had stopped, and it was daylight outside. I looked at my watch. It said two PM. The Altairi were standing in the exact same spot they'd been in before, glaring, and Calvin was sitting hunched forward on a kitchen chair, his chin in his hand, watching them and looking worried.

"Did something happen?" I glanced over at the TV. Reverend Thresher was talking. The logo read, "Thresher Launches Galaxywide Christian Crusade." At least it didn't say, "Air Strikes in Middle East."

Calvin was slowly shaking his head.

"Wasn't there any response to 'Silent Night'?" I asked.

"No, there was," he said. "You responded to the version by Nat King Cole."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. I meant the Altairi. They didn't respond to any of the 'Silent Nights'?"

"No, they responded," he said, "but just to one version."

"But that's good, isn't it?" I asked. "Now we can analyze what it was

that was different about it that they were responding to. Which version was it?"

Instead of answering, he walked over to the CD player and hit play. A loud chorus of nasal female voices began belting out, "Silent night, holy night," shouting to be heard over a cacophony of clinks and clacks. "What is that?" I asked.

"The Broadway chorus of the musical *42nd Street* singing and tap-dancing to 'Silent Night.' They recorded it for a special Broadway Christmas charity project."

I looked over at the Altairi, thinking maybe Calvin was wrong and they hadn't really fallen asleep, but in spite of the din, they had sagged limply over, their heads nearly touching the ground, looking almost peaceful. Their glares had faded from full-bore Aunt Judith to only mildly disapproving.

I listened to the *42nd Street* chorines tapping and belting out "Silent Night" at the top of their lungs some more. "It is kind of appealing," I said, "especially the part where they shout out 'Mother and child!'"

"I know," he said. "I'd like it played at our wedding. And obviously the Altairi share our good taste. But aside from that, I'm not sure *what* it tells us."

"That the Altairi like show tunes?" I suggested.

"God forbid. Think what Reverend Thresher would do with that," he said. "Besides, they didn't respond to 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat.'"

"No, but they did to that song from 'Mame.'"

"And to the one from 1776," he said, "but not to *The Music Man* or *Rent*," he said frustratedly. "Which puts us right back where we started. I have no clue what they're responding to!"

"I know," I said. "I'm so sorry. I should never have gotten you involved in this. You have your ACHES thing to direct."

"It doesn't start till seven," he said, rummaging through a stack of LPs, "which means we've got another four hours to work. If we could just find another 'Silent Night' they'll respond to, we might be able to figure out what in God's name they're doing. What the hell happened to that *Star Wars Christmas* album?"

"Stop," I said, "this is ridiculous." I took the albums out of his hands. "You're exhausted, and you've got a big job to do. You can't direct all those people on no sleep. This can wait."

"But—"

"People think better after a nap," I said firmly. "You'll wake up, and the solution will be perfectly obvious."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then you'll go direct your choir, and—"

"Choirs," he said thoughtfully.

"Or All-City Sing or Aches and Pains or whatever you call it, and I'll stay here and play the Altairi some more 'Silent Nights' till you get back and—"

"'Sit Down, John' was sung by the chorus," he said, looking past me at the drooping Altairi. "And so was 'While Shepherds Watched.' And the *42nd Street* 'Silent Night' was the only one that wasn't a solo." He grabbed my shoulders. "They're all choruses. That's why they didn't respond to Julie Andrews singing 'Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow,' or to Stubby Kaye

singing 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat.' They only respond to groups of voices."

I shook my head. "You forgot 'Awake, Awake, Ye Drowsy Souls.'"

"Oh," he said, his face falling, "you're right. Wait!" He lunged for the Julie Andrews CD and stuck it in the recorder. "I think Julie Andrews sings the verse and then a chorus comes in. Listen."

He was right. The chorus had sung "Awake, awake."

"Who sang the 'Joy to the World' you played them on the CD from the mall?" Calvin asked.

"Just Julie Andrews," I said. "And Brenda Lee sang 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree.'"

"And Johnny Mathis sang 'Angels from the Realms of Glory,'" he said happily. "But the Hanukkah song, which they did respond to, was sung by the . . ." he read it off the CD case, "the Shalom Singers. That's got to be it." He began looking through the LPs again.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The Mormon Tabernacle Choir," he said. "They've *got* to have recorded 'Silent Night.' We'll play it for the Altairi, and if they fall asleep, we'll know we're on the right track—"

"But they're already asleep," I pointed out, gesturing to where they stood looking like a week-old flower arrangement. "How—?"

He was already digging again. He brought up a Cambridge Boys' Choir album, pulled the LP out, and read the label, muttering, "I know it's on here . . . here it is." He put it on, and a chorus of sweet boys' voices sang, "Christians Awake, Salute the Happy Morn."

The Altairi straightened immediately and glared at us. "You were right," I said softly, but he wasn't listening. He had the LP off the turntable and was reading the label again, muttering, "Come on, you have to have done 'Silent Night.' Everyone does 'Silent Night.'" He flipped the LP over, said, "I *knew* it," popped it back on the turntable, and dropped the needle expertly. "' . . . and mild,'" the boys' angelic voices sang, "sleep . . ."

The Altairi drooped over before the word was even out. "That's definitely it!" I said. "That's the common denominator."

He shook his head. "We need more data. It could just be a coincidence. We need to find a choral version of 'Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.' And 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat.' Where did you put *Guys and Dolls*?"

"But that was a solo."

"The first part, the part *we* played them was a solo. Later on all the gamblers come in. We should have played them the whole song."

"We couldn't, remember?" I said, handing it to him. "Remember the parts about dragging you under and drowning, not to mention gambling and drinking?"

"Oh, right," he said. He put headphones on, listened, and then unplugged them. "Sit Down . . ." a chorus of men's voices sang lustily, and the Altairi sat down.

We played choir versions of "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth" and "Rise Up, Shepherds, and Follow." The Altairi sat down and stood up. "You're right," he said after the Altairi knelt to the Platters singing "The First Noel." "It's the common denominator, all right. But why?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe they can't understand things said to them by fewer voices than a choir. That would explain why there are six of them. Maybe each one only hears certain frequencies, which singly are meaningless, but with six of them—"

He shook his head. "You're forgetting the Andrews Sisters. And Bare-naked Ladies. And even if it is the choir aspect they're responding to, it still doesn't tell us what they're doing here."

"But now we know how to get them to tell us," I said, grabbing up *The Holly Jolly Book of Christmas Songs*. "Can you find a choir version of 'Adeste Fideles' in English?"

"I think so," he said. "Why?"

"Because it's got 'we greet thee' in it," I said, running my fingers down the lyrics of "Good Christian Men, Rejoice."

"And there's 'Watchman, Tell Us of the Night,'" he said. "And 'great glad tidings tell.' They're bound to respond to one of them."

But they didn't. Peter, Paul, and Mary ordered the Altairi to "go tell" (we blanked out the "on the mountain part"), but either the Altairi didn't like folk music, or the Andrews Sisters had been a fluke.

Or we had jumped to conclusions. When we tried the same song again, this time by the Boston Commons Choir, there was still no response. And none to choral versions of "Deck the Halls" ("while I tell") or "Jolly Old St. Nicholas" ("don't you tell a single soul" minus "don't" and "a single soul"). Or to "The Friendly Beasts," even though all six verses had "tell" in them.

Calvin thought the tense might be the problem and played parts of "Little St. Nick" ("tale" and "told") and "The Carol of the Bells" ("telling"), but to no avail. "Maybe the word's the problem," I said. "Maybe they just don't know the word 'tell,'" but they didn't respond to "say" or to "saying" and "said," to "messages" or to "proclaim."

"We must have been wrong about the choir thing," Calvin said, but that wasn't it either. While he was in the bedroom putting his tux on for the Sing, I played them snatches of "Angel's We Have Heard on High" and "Up on the Rooftop" from the Barenaked Ladies CD, and they knelt and jumped right on cue.

"Maybe they think Earth's a gym and this is an exercise class," Calvin said, coming in as they were leaping to the St. Paul's Cathedral Choir singing "The Twelve Days of Christmas." "I don't suppose the word 'calling' had any effect on them."

"No," I said, tying his bow tie, "and 'I'm offering this simple phrase' didn't either. Has it occurred to you that the music might not be having any effect at all, and they just happen to be sitting and leaping and kneeling at the same time as the words are being sung?"

"No," he said. "There's a connection. If there wasn't, they wouldn't look so irritated that we haven't been able to figure it out yet."

He was right. Their glares had, if anything, intensified, and their very posture radiated disapproval.

"We need more data, that's all," he said, going to get his black shoes. "As soon as I get back, we'll—" He stopped.

"What is it?"

"You'd better look at this," he said, pointing at the TV. The screen was

showing a photo of the ship. All the lights were on, and exhaust was coming out of assorted side vents. Calvin grabbed the remote and turned it up.

"It is now believed that the Altairi have returned to their ship and are preparing to depart," the newscaster said. I glanced over at the Altairi. They were still standing there. "Analysis of the ignition cycle indicates that takeoff will be in less than six hours."

"What do we do now?" I asked Calvin.

"We figure this out. You heard them. We've got six hours till blast-off."

"But the Sing—"

He handed me my coat. "We know it's got *something* to do with choirs, and I've got every kind you could want. We'll take the Altairi to the convention center and hope we think of something on the way."

We didn't think of anything on the way. "Maybe I should take them back to their ship," I said, pulling into the parking lot. "What if I cause them to get left behind?"

"They are *not* E.T.," he said.

I parked at the service entrance, got out, and started to slide the back door of the van open. "No, leave them there," Calvin said. "We've got to find a place to put them before we take them in. Lock the car."

I did, even though I doubted if it would do any good, and followed Calvin through a side door marked "Choirs Only" and through a maze of corridors lined with rooms marked, "St. Peter's Boys Choir," "Red Hat Glee Club," "Denver Gay Men's Chorus," "Sweet Adelines Show Chorus," "Mile High Jazz Singers." There was a hubbub in the front of the building, and when we crossed the main corridor, we could see people in gold and green and black robes milling around talking.

Calvin opened several doors one after the other, ducked inside the rooms, shutting the door after him, and then re-emerged, shaking his head. "We can't let the Altairi hear the *Messiah*, and you can still hear the noise from the auditorium," he said. "We need someplace soundproof."

"Or farther away," I said, leading the way down the corridor and turning down a side hall. And running smack into his seventh graders coming out of one of the meeting rooms. Mrs. Carlson was videotaping them, and another mother was attempting to line them up to go in, but as soon as they saw Calvin, they clustered around him saying, "Mr. Ledbetter, where have you been? We thought you weren't coming," and "Mr. Ledbetter, Mrs. Carlson says we have to turn our cell phones off, but can't we just have them on vibrate?" and "Mr. Ledbetter, Shelby and I were supposed to go in together, but she says she wants to be partners with Danika."

Calvin ignored them. "Kaneesha, could you hear any of the groups rehearsing when you were in getting dressed?"

"Why?" Belinda asked. "Did we miss the call to go in?"

"Could you, Kaneesha?" he persisted.

"A little bit," she said.

"That won't work then," he said to me. "I'll go check the room at the end. Wait here." He sprinted along the hall.

"You were at the mall that day," Belinda said accusingly to me. "Are you and Mr. Ledbetter going out?"

We may all be going out together—with a bang—if we don't figure out what the Altairi are doing, I thought. "No," I said.

"Are you hooking up?" Chelsea asked.

"Chelsea!" Mrs. Carlson said, horrified.

"Well, are you?"

"Aren't you supposed to be lining up?" I asked.

Calvin came back at a dead run. "It should work," he said to me. "It seems fairly soundproof."

"Why does it have to be soundproof?" Chelsea asked.

"I bet it's so nobody can hear them making out," Belinda said, and Chelsea began making smooching noises.

"Time to go in, ladies," he said in his director's voice, "line up," and he really was amazing. They immediately formed pairs and began making a line.

"Wait till everybody's gone into the auditorium," he said, pulling me aside, "and then go get them and bring them in. I'll do a few minutes' intro of the orchestra and the organizing committee so the Altairi won't hear any songs while you're getting them to the room. There's a table you can use to barricade the door so nobody can get in."

"And what if the Altairi try to leave?" I asked. "A barricade won't stop them, you know."

"Call me on my cell phone, and I'll tell the audience there's a fire drill or something. Okay? I'll make this as short as I can." He grinned. "No 'Twelve Days of Christmas.' Don't worry, Meg. We'll figure this out."

"I *told* you she was his girlfriend."

"Is she, Mr. Ledbetter?"

"Let's go, ladies," he said and led them down the hall and into the auditorium. Just as the auditorium doors shut on the last stragglers, my cell phone rang. It was Dr. Morthman, calling to say, "You can stop looking. The Altairi are in their ship."

"How do you know? Have you seen them?" I asked, thinking, I knew I shouldn't have left them in the car.

"No, but the ship's begun the ignition process, and it's going faster than NASA previously estimated. They're now saying it's no more than four hours to takeoff. Where are you?"

"On my way back," I said, trying not to sound like I was running out to the parking lot and unlocking the van, which, thank goodness, was at least still there and intact.

"Well, hurry it up," Dr. Morthman snapped. "The press is here. You're going to have to explain to them exactly how you let the Altairi get away." I pulled open the van's door. The Altairi weren't inside. Oh, no. "I blame this entire debacle on you," Dr. Morthman said. "If there are international repercussions—"

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said, hung up, and turned to run around to the driver's side.

And collided with the Altairi, who had apparently been standing behind me the entire time. "Don't scare me like that," I said. "Now come on," and led them rapidly into the convention center, past the shut doors of the auditorium, where I could hear talking but not singing, thank goodness, and along the long hall to the room Calvin had indicated.

It was empty except for the table Calvin had mentioned. I herded the Altairi inside and then tipped the table on its side, pushed it in front of the door, wedging it under the doorknob, and then leaned my ear against the door to see if I could hear any sound from the auditorium, but Calvin had been right. I couldn't hear anything, and they should have started by now.

And now what? With takeoff only four hours away, I needed to take advantage of every second, but there was nothing in the room I could use—no piano or CD player or LPs. We should have used his seventh graders' dressing room, I thought. They'd at least have had ipods or something.

But even if I played the Altairi hundreds of Christmas carols being sung by a choir, and they responded to them all—bowing, decking halls, dashing through snow in a one-horse open sleigh, following yonder star—I'd still be no closer to figuring out why they were here or why they'd decided to leave. Or why they'd taken the very loud tap-dancing chorus of *42nd Street* singing "Sleep in heavenly peace" as a direct order. If they even know what the word "sleep"—or "seated" or "spin" or "blink"—meant.

Calvin had surmised they could only hear words sung to them with more than one voice, but that couldn't be it. Someone hearing a word for the first time would have no idea what it meant, and they'd never heard "all seated on the ground" till that day in the mall. They had to have heard the word before to have known what it meant, and they'd only have heard it spoken. Which meant they could hear spoken words as well as sung ones.

They could have read the words, I thought, remembering the Rosetta Stone and the dictionaries Dr. Short had given them. But even if they'd somehow taught themselves to read English, they wouldn't know how it was pronounced. They wouldn't have recognized it when they heard it spoken. The only way they could do that was by hearing the spoken word. Which meant they'd been listening to and understanding every word we'd said for the past nine months. Including Calvin's and my conversations about them slaying babies and destroying the planet. No wonder they were leaving.

But if they understood us, then that meant one of two things—they were either unwilling to talk to us or were incapable of speaking. Had their sitting down and their other responses been an attempt at sign language?

No, that couldn't be it either. They could have responded just as easily to a spoken "sit" and done it months earlier. And if they were trying to communicate, wouldn't they have given Calvin and me some hint we were on the right—or the wrong—track instead of just standing there with that we-are-not-amused glare? And I didn't believe for a moment those expressions were an accident of nature. I knew disapproval when I saw it. I'd watched Aunt Judith too many years not to—

Aunt Judith. I took my cell phone out of my pocket and called my sister Tracy. "Tell me everything you can remember about Aunt Judith," I said when she answered.

"Has something happened to her?" she said, sounding alarmed. "When I talked to her last week she—"

"Last week?" I said. "You mean Aunt Judith's still *alive*?"

"Well, she was last week when we had lunch."

"Lunch? With Aunt Judith? Are we talking about the same person? Dad's Aunt Judith? The Gorgon?"

"Yes, only she's not a Gorgon. She's actually very nice when you get to know her."

"Aunt Judith," I said, "the one who always glared disapprovingly at everybody?"

"Yes, only she hasn't glared at me in years. As I say, when you get to know her—"

"And exactly how did you do that?"

"I thanked her for my birthday present."

"And—?" I said. "That can't have been all. Mom always made both of us thank her nicely for our presents."

"I know, but they weren't proper thank yous. 'A prompt handwritten note expressing gratitude is the only proper form of thanks,'" Tracy said, obviously quoting. "I was in high school, and we had to write a thank-you letter to someone for class. She'd just sent me my birthday card with the dollar in it, so I wrote her, and the next day she called and gave me this long lecture about the importance of good manners and how shocking it was that no one followed the most basic rules of etiquette any more and how she was delighted to see that at least one young person knew how to behave, and then she asked me if I'd like to go see *Les Miz* with her, and I bought a copy of Emily Post, and we've gotten along great ever since. She sent Evan and me a sterling silver fish slice when we got married."

"For which you sent her a hand-written thank-you note," I said absently. Aunt Judith had been glaring because we were boorish and unmanly. Was that why the Altairi looked so disapproving, because they were waiting for the equivalent of a hand-written thank-you note from us?

If that was the case, we were doomed. Rules of etiquette are notoriously illogical and culture-specific, and there was no intergalactic Emily Post for me to consult. And I had, oh, God, less than two hours till lift-off.

"Tell me exactly what she said that day she called you," I said, unwilling to give up the idea that she was somehow the key.

"It was eight years ago—"

"I know. Try to remember."

"Okay . . . there was a lot of stuff about gloves and how I shouldn't wear white shoes after Labor Day and how I shouldn't cross my legs. 'Well-bred young ladies sit with their ankles crossed.'"

Had the Altairi's sitting down in the mall been an etiquette lesson in the proper way to sit? It seemed unlikely, but so did Aunt Judith's refusal to speak to people because of the color of their shoes on certain calendar dates.

" . . . and she said if I got married, I needed to send out engraved invitations," Tracy said. "Which I did. I think that's why she gave us the fish slice."

"I don't care about the fish slice. What did she say about your thank-you note?"

"She said, 'Well, it's about time, Tracy. I'd nearly given up hope of anyone in your family showing any signs of civilized behavior.'"

Civilized behavior. That was it. The Altairi, like Aunt Judith sitting in our living room glaring, had been waiting for a sign that we were civilized. And singing—correction, *group* singing—was that sign. But was it an arbitrary rule of etiquette, like white shoes and engraved invitations, or was it a symbol of something else?

I thought of Calvin telling his chattering seventh graders to line up, and the milling gigling, chaotic muddle of girls coming together in an organized, beautifully behaved, *civilized* line.

Coming together. That was the civilized behavior the Altairi had been waiting for a sign of. And they'd seen precious little of it in the nine months they'd been here: the disorganized commission with members quitting and those who were left not listening to anyone; that awful rehearsal where the basses couldn't get the entrance right to save them; the harried shoppers in the mall, dragging their screaming children after them. The piped-in choir singing "While Shepherds Watched" might have been the first indication they'd seen—correction, heard—that we were capable of getting along with each other at all.

No wonder they'd sat down right there in the middle of the mall. They must have thought, like Aunt Judith, "Well, it's about time!" But then why hadn't they done the equivalent of calling and asking us to go see *Les Miz*?

Maybe they hadn't been sure that what they'd seen—correction, heard—was what they thought it was. They'd never *seen* people sing, except for Calvin and those pathetic basses. They'd seen no signs we were capable of singing beautifully in harmony.

But "While Shepherds Watched" had convinced them it might be possible, which was why they'd followed us around and why they'd sat and slept and gone astray whenever they heard more than one voice, hoping we'd get the hint, waiting for further proof.

In which case we should be in the auditorium, listening to the Sing, instead of in this soundproof room. Especially since the fact that their ship was getting ready to take off indicated they'd given up and decided they were mistaken after all. "Come on," I said to the Altairi and stood up. "I need to show you something." I shoved the table away from the door, and opened it.

On Calvin. "Oh, good, you're here," I said. "I—why aren't you in there directing?"

"I announced an intermission so I could tell you something. I think I've got it, the thing the Altairi have been responding to," he said, grabbing me by the arms, "the reason they reacted to Christmas songs. I thought of it while I was directing 'Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.' What do nearly all Christmas songs have in them?"

"I don't know," I said. "Chestnuts? Santa Claus? Bells?"

"Close," he said. "Choirs."

Choirs? "We already knew they responded to songs sung by choirs," I said, confused.

"Not just to songs sung by choirs. Songs *about* choirs. Christmas carols being sung by the choir, angel choirs, children's choirs, wassailers, carolers, strike the harp and join the *chorus*," he said. "The angels in 'Angels We Have Heard on High' are sweetly singing o'er the plains. In 'It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,' all the world gives back the song they sing. They're all about singing," he said excitedly. "That glorious song of old, 'whom angels greet with anthems sweet.'" Look," he flipped through the pages of his music, pointing out phrases, "oh, hear the angel voices, 'as men of old have sung, 'whom shepherds guard and angels sing, 'let men

their songs employ.' There are references to singing in songs by Randy Travis, the 'Peanuts' kids, Paul McCartney, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. It wasn't just that 'While Shepherds Watched' was sung by a choir. It was that it was a song *about* choirs singing. And not just singing, but what they're singing." He thrust the song in front of me, pointing to the last verse. "'Goodwill, henceforth from heaven to men.' That's what they've been trying to communicate to us."

I shook my head. "It's what they've been waiting for us to communicate to them. Just like Aunt Judith."

"Aunt Judith?"

"I'll explain later. Right now we've got to prove we're civilized before the Altairi leave."

"And how do we do that?"

"We sing to them, or rather, the All-City Holiday Ecumenical Sing does."

"What do we sing?"

I wasn't sure it mattered. I was pretty certain what they were looking for was proof we could cooperate and work together in harmony, and in that case, "Mele Kalikimaka" would work as well as "The Peace Carol." But it wouldn't hurt to make things as clear to them as we could. And it would be nice if it was also something that Reverend Thresher couldn't use as ammunition for his Galaxywide Christian Crusade.

"We need to sing something that will convince the Altairi we're a civilized species," I said, "something that conveys goodwill and peace. Especially peace. And not religion, if that's possible."

"How much time have we got to write it?" Calvin asked. "And we'll have to get copies made—"

My cell phone rang. The screen showed it was Dr. Morthman. "Hang on," I said, hitting talk. "I should be able to tell you in a second. Hello?"

"Where *are* you?" Dr. Morthman shouted. "The ship's beginning its final ignition cycle."

I whirled around to make sure the Altairi were still there. They were, thank goodness, and still glaring. "How long does the final cycle take?" I asked.

"They don't know," Dr. Morthman said, "ten minutes at the outside. If you don't get here immediately—"

I hung up.

"Well?" Calvin said. "How much time have we got?"

"None," I said.

"Then we'll have to use something we've already got," he said and began riffling through his sheaf of music, "and something people know the harmony to. Civilized . . . civilized . . . I think . . ." He found what he was looking for and scanned it. "... Yeah, if I change a couple of words, this should do the trick. Do you think the Altairi understand Latin?"

"I wouldn't put it past them."

"We'll just do the first two lines. Wait five minutes—"

"Five minutes—?"

"So I can brief everybody on the changes. Then bring the Altairi in."

"Okay," I said, and he took off at a run for the auditorium.

* * *

There was an expectant buzz in the audience when we came through the double doors, and the ranks of choirs arrayed around the stage, a sea of maroon and gold and green and purple robes, began whispering to each other behind their music.

Calvin had apparently just finished his briefing. Some of the choirs and the audience were busily scribbling notes on their music, and passing pencils, and asking each other questions. The orchestra, on one side of the stage, was warming up in a jumbled cacophony of screeches and hoots and blats.

On the other side, the sopranos of the Mile-High Women's Chorus were apparently filling the altos in on my interrupting rehearsal the other night, because they all turned to glare at me. "I think it's ridiculous that we can't sing the words we know," an elderly woman wearing gloves and a hat with a veil said to her companion.

Her companion nodded. "If you ask me, they're carrying this entire ecumenical thing too far. I mean, humans are one thing, but *aliens*?"

There's no way this is going to work, I thought, looking over at Calvin's seventh graders, who were leaning over the backs of each other's chairs, giggling and chewing gum. Belinda was text-messaging someone on her cell phone, and Kaneesha was listening to her iPod. Chelsea had her hand up and was calling, "Mr. Ledbetter! Mr. Ledbetter, Shelby took my music."

Over in the orchestra, the percussionist was practicing crashing his cymbals. It's hopeless, I thought, looking over at the glaring Altairi. There's no way we can convince them we're sentient, let alone civilized.

My cell phone rang. And that's it, the straw that's going to break the camel's back, I thought, fumbling for it. Now everyone, even the musician with the cymbals, was glaring at me. "How rude!" the elderly woman in the white gloves said.

"The ship's started its countdown!" Dr. Morthman bellowed in my ear.

I hit "end" and turned the phone off. "Hurry," I mouthed to Calvin, and he nodded and stepped up on the dais.

He tapped the music stand with his baton, and the entire auditorium fell silent. "*Adeste Fideles*," he said, and everyone opened their music.

"*Adeste Fideles*?" What's he doing? I thought. "O come, all ye faithful" isn't what we need. I ran mentally through the lyrics: "Come ye to Bethlehem . . . come let us adore him . . ." No, no, not religious!

But it was too late. Calvin had already spread his hands out, palms up, and lifted them, and everyone was getting to their feet. He nodded to the orchestra, and they began playing the introduction to "*Adeste Fideles*."

I turned to look at the Altairi. They were glaring even more condemningly than usual. I moved between them and the doors.

The symphony was reaching the end of the introduction. Calvin glanced at me. I smiled, I hoped encouragingly, and held up crossed fingers. He nodded and then raised his baton again and brought it down.

"Have you ever been to a Sing?" Calvin had said. "It's pretty impressive." There had to be nearly four thousand people in that auditorium, all of them singing in perfect harmony, and if they'd been singing "The Chipmunks Song," it would still have been awe-inspiring. But the words they were singing couldn't have been more perfect if Calvin and I had written them to order. "Sing, earthly choirs," they trilled, "sing in exultation. Sing,

to the citizens of heaven above," and the Altairi glide-waddled up the aisle to the stage and sat down at Calvin's feet.

I ducked outside to the hall and called Dr. Morthman. "What's happening with the ship?" I asked him.

"Where are you?" he demanded. "I thought you said you were on your way over here."

"There's a lot of traffic," I said. "What's the ship doing?"

"It's aborted its ignition sequence and shut down its lights," he said.

Good, I thought. That means what we're doing is working.

"It's just sitting there on the ground."

"How appropriate," I murmured.

"What do you mean by that?" he said accusingly. "Spectrum analysis shows the Altairi aren't in their ship. You've got them, don't you? Where are you and what have you done to them? If—"

I hung up, switched off my phone, and went back inside. They'd finished "*Adeste Fideles*" and were singing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." The Altairi were still sitting at Calvin's feet. "... Reconciled," the assemblage sang, "Joyful, all ye nations rise," and the Altairi rose.

And rose, till they were a good two feet above the aisle. There was a collective gasp, and everyone stopped singing and stared at them floating there.

No, don't stop, I thought, and hurried forward, but Calvin had it under control. He turned a glare worthy of Aunt Judith on his seventh-grade girls, and they swallowed hard and started singing again, and after a moment everyone else recovered themselves and joined in to finish the verse.

When the song ended, Calvin turned and mouthed at me, "What do I do next?"

"Keep singing," I mouthed back.

"Singing what?"

I shrugged him an "I don't know," and mouthed, "What about this?" and pointed at the fourth song on the program.

He grinned, turned back to his choirs, and announced, "We will now sing, 'There's a Song in the Air.'"

There was a rustle of pages, and they began singing. I eyed the Altairi warily, looking for a lessening in elevation, but they continued to hover, and when the choir reached, "and the beautiful sing," it seemed to me their glares became slightly less fierce.

"And that song from afar has swept over the earth," the assemblage sang, and the auditorium doors burst open and Dr. Morthman, Reverend Thresher, and dozens of FBI agents and police and reporters and cameramen came rushing in. "Stay where you are," one of the FBI agents shouted.

"Blasphemous!" Reverend Thresher roared. "Look at this! Witches, homosexuals, liberals!"

"Arrest that young woman," Dr. Morthman said, pointing at me, "and the young man directing—" He stopped and gaped at the Altairi hovering above the stage. Flashes went off, reporters talked into microphones, and Reverend Thresher positioned himself squarely in front of one of the cameras and clasped his hands. "Oh, Lord," he shouted, "drive Satan's demons out of the Altairi!"

"No!" I shouted to Calvin's seventh graders, "don't stop singing," but they already had. I looked desperately at Calvin. "Keep directing!" I said, but the police were already moving forward to handcuff him, stepping cautiously around the Altairi, who were drifting earthward like slowly leaking balloons.

"And teach these sinners here the error of their ways," Reverend Thresher was intoning.

"You can't do this, Dr. Morthman," I said desperately. "The Altairi—"

He grabbed my arm and dragged me to one of the police officers. "I want both of them charged with kidnapping," he said, "and I want her charged with conspiracy. She's responsible for this entire—" He stopped and stared past me.

I turned around. The Altairi were standing directly behind me, glaring. The police officer, who'd been about to clamp handcuffs on me, let go of my wrist and backed away, and so did the reporters and the FBI.

"Your excellencies," Dr. Morthman said, taking several steps back, "I want you to know the commission had nothing to do with this. We knew nothing about it. It's entirely this young woman's fault. She . . ."

"We acknowledge your greetings," the Altairi in the center said, bowing to me, "and greet you in return."

A murmur of surprise rumbled through the auditorium, and Dr. Morthman stammered, "Y-you speak English?"

"Of course," I said and bowed to the Altairi. "It's nice to finally be able to communicate with you."

"We welcome you into the company of citizens of the heavens," the one on the end said, "and reciprocate your offers of good will, peace on earth, and chestnuts."

"We assure you that we come bearing gifts as well," the Altaurus on the other end said.

"It's a miracle!" Reverend Thresher shouted. "The Lord has healed them! He has unlocked their lips!" He dropped to his knees and began to pray. "Oh, Lord, we know it is our prayers which have brought this miracle about—"

Dr. Morthman bounded forward. "Your excellencies, allow me to be the first to welcome you to our humble planet," he said, extending his hand. "On behalf of the government of the—"

The Altairi ignored him. "We had begun to think we had erred in our assessment of your world," the one who'd spoken before said to me, and the one next to her? him? said, "We doubted your species was fully sentient."

"I know," I said. "I doubt it myself sometimes."

"We also doubted you understood the concept of accord," the one on the other end said, and turned and glared pointedly at Calvin's wrists.

"I think you'd better unhandcuff Mr. Ledbetter," I said to Dr. Morthman.

"Of course, of course," he said, motioning to the police officer. "Explain to them it was all a little misunderstanding," he whispered to me, and the Altairi turned to glare at him and then at the police officer.

When Calvin was out of the handcuffs, the one on the end said, "As the men of old, we are with gladness to be proved wrong."

So are we, I thought. "We're delighted to welcome you to our planet," I said.

"Now if you'll accompany me back to DU," Dr. Morthman cut in, "we'll arrange for you to go to Washington to meet with the president and—"

The Altairi began to glare again. Oh, no, I thought, and looked frantically at Calvin.

"We have not yet finished greeting the delegation, Dr. Morthman," Calvin said. He turned to the Altairi. "We would like to sing you the rest of our greeting songs."

"We wish to hear them," the Altairi in the center said, and the six of them immediately turned, walked back up the aisle, and sat down.

"I think it would be a good idea if you sat down, too," I said to Dr. Morthman and the FBI agents.

"Can some of you share your music with them?" Calvin said to the people in the last row. "And help them find the right place?"

"I have no intention of singing with witches and homo—" Reverend Thresher said indignantly, and the Altairi all turned to glare at him. He sat down, and an elderly man in a yarmulke handed him his music.

"What do we do about the words to the 'Hallelujah Chorus'?" Calvin whispered to me, and the Altairi stood up and walked back down the aisle to us.

"There is no need to alter your joyful songs. We wish to hear them with the native words," the one in the center said.

"We have a great interest in your planet's myths and superstitions," the one on the end said, "the child in the manger, the lighting of the Kwanzaa menorah, the bringing of toys and teeth to children. We are eager to learn more."

"We have many questions," the next one in line said. "If the child was born in a desert land, then how can King Herod have taken the children on a sleigh ride?"

"Sleigh ride?" Dr. Morthman said, and Calvin looked inquiringly at me.

"All children young to sleigh," I whispered.

"Also, if holly is jolly, then why does it bark?" the one on the other end said. "And, Mr. Ledbetter, is Ms. Yates your girlfriend?"

"There will be time for questions, negotiations, and gifts when the greetings have been completed," the second Altairus on the left, the one who hadn't said anything up till then, said, and I realized he must be the leader. Or the choir director, I thought. When he spoke, the Altairi instantly formed themselves into pairs, walked back up the aisle, and sat down.

I picked up Calvin's baton and handed it to him. "What do you think we should sing first?" he asked me.

"All I want for Christmas is you," I said.

"Really? I was thinking maybe we should start with 'Angels We Have Heard on High' or—"

"That wasn't a song title," I said.

"Oh," he said and turned to the Altairi. "The answer to your question is yes."

"These are tidings of great joy," the one in the center said.

"There shall be many mistletoeings," the one on the end added. The second Altairus on the left glared at them.

"I think we'd better sing," I said, and squeezed into the first row, be-

tween Reverend McIntyre and an African-American woman in a turban and dashiki.

Calvin stepped onto the podium. "The Hallelujah Chorus," Calvin said, and there was a shuffling of pages as people found their music. The woman next to me held out her music to me so we could share and whispered, "It's considered proper etiquette to stand up for this. In honor of King George the Third. He's supposed to have stood up the first time he heard it."

"Actually," Reverend McIntyre whispered to me, "he may merely have been startled out of a sound sleep, but rising out of respect and admiration is still an appropriate response."

I nodded. Calvin raised his baton, and the entire auditorium, except for the Altairi, rose as one and began to sing. And if I'd thought *Adeste Fideles* sounded wonderful, the "Hallelujah Chorus" was absolutely breathtaking, and suddenly all those lyrics about glorious songs of old and anthems sweet and repeating the sounding joy suddenly made sense. "And the whole world give back the song," I thought, "which now the angels sing." And apparently the Altairi were as overwhelmed by the music as I was. After the fifth "Hallelujah!" they rose into the air like they'd done before. And rose. And rose, till they floated giddily just below the high domed ceiling.

I knew just how they felt.

It was definitely a communications breakthrough. The Altairi haven't stopped talking since the All-City Sing, though we're not actually much farther along than we were before. They're much better at asking questions than answering them. They did finally tell us where they came from—the star Alsafi in the constellation Draco. But since the meaning of Altair is "the flying one" (and Alsafi means "cooking tripod") everyone still calls them the Altairi.

They also told us why they turned up at Calvin's apartment and kept following me ("We glimpsed interesting possibilities of accord between you and Mr. Ledbetter") and explained, more or less, how their spaceship works, which the Air Force has found extremely interesting. But we still don't know why they came here. Or what they want. The only thing they've told us specifically was that they wanted to have Dr. Morthman and Reverend Thresher removed from the commission, and to have Dr. Wakamura put in charge. It turns out they like being squirted, at least as much as they like anything we do. They still glare.

So does Aunt Judith. She called me the day after the All-Community Sing to tell me she'd seen me on CNN and thought I'd done a nice job saving the planet, but what on earth was I wearing? Didn't I know one was supposed to dress up for a concert? I told her everything that had happened was all thanks to her, and she glared at me (I could feel it, even over the phone) and hung up.

But she must not be too mad. When she heard I was engaged, she called my sister Tracy and told her she expected to be invited to the wedding shower. My mother is cleaning like mad.

I wonder if the Altairi will give us a fish slice. Or a birthday card with a dollar in it. Or faster-than-light travel. ○

Tim McDaniel updates us with the following: "I lived a quiet, simple life, teaching ESL and collecting plastic dinosaurs—until my story, 'Teachers' Lounge,' came out in *Asimov's* last August. Since then, it's been an unending nightmare of dodging paparazzi and fending off groupies. Well, I guess I can live with it." While we may be able to survive magazines plastered with telephotos of Tim on the beach, we may not be able to survive interstellar travel without . . .

THE LONESOME PLANET TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Tim McDaniel

Here is the latest update, brought to you by the Lonesome Planet Travelers' Advisory Board, as certified by the Local Group. Those of you who—like us—have been here awhile may find little new here, but remember it's our task to set the newcomers straight. Things are a little different here than you may be used to back home.

Stealth

- Keep your blurifiers on at all times—you never know who is carrying a camera these days. Some of these people even have cameras in their phones, although our researchers have yet to determine why.
- Having said that, buzzing Air Force jets and installations is fine—they never tell anyone what they see, as per our agreement.
- Finally, I know the big head/almond eye masks are a pain, but please, people, keep them on. If they saw our *real* faces . . . well, let's

just say it would engender a really negative reaction. How negative? Remember the robot rebellions of the Lost Arm? Like that.

Relaxation

- Mutilations. Okay, we've all been there. Fun is fun, but there have to be some rules. Cows, now, are okay to mutilate—we all know we can't resist those lips, those genitals! One of my podsisters does things with a cow's genitals that are only legal in the Lesser Magellenic Cloud. That's right—the Lesser!
- Off limits, however, are dogs (of course), pandas (still), giraffes (again), three-toed sloths (for obvious reasons), and adolescent beluga whales (don't ask).

Playmates

- Of course, now and then we just have to abduct a local. Again, the Advisory Group is not one to stand in the way of tradition. Please remember, however, that only some of the locals are eligible for abduction. Stick to the smaller northern continent, and remember that people in poor, country neighborhoods make the best abductees. The rule of thumbs: "If you live in a trailer, it's okay to nail yah." Don't take anyone from a gated community, and if you take a public figure, such as a politician or pop star, do *not* send them home again afterwards. Instead, consider replacing them with a symboid or replimonster.
- What's okay to stick where? Inserts are fine, but make them small. Nasal passages and teeth are the most popular places, but why not get creative? The natives have several other interesting cavities! Unfortunately, some few of the natives have discovered that wearing tinfoil hats blocks some of our control-rays, so check out the penetrating power of your transmitter before spending a lot on fancy inserts.
- Now, as to what may be done with abductees. Exams are fine, and sexual practices are expected. Eating or collecting trophies, however, is frowned upon.
- Just a reminder: It's fun to give the abductees a little lost time—a mystery to occupy their thoughts.
- Please don't bother the Men in Black—remember, they're on our side. If they weren't covering our tracks, things would be a lot more complicated than they are already. Ditto the big fast food chains—which are, incidentally, another great source for the nether parts of cows.

Health

- A warning: Don't drink the water that is made available for public consumption in certain parts of the planet. It very well may contain *fluoride*. More than one visitor has come home with enflamed gums, swollen pulgassods, and an awkward gait after sipping a local beverage. And stay away from Dr Pepper unless you have a private place and an open-minded partner handy.
- Vaccinations may be a pain in the asses, but they *are* required for anyone who expects to come into close contact with the natives. Slime-based lifeforms, as always, may use suppositories in lieu of injected vaccines.

Monoliths

● With the ratification of the Concord of C57D, construction of pranks such as Stonehenge, black transforming monoliths, and pyramids of the types placed in Egypt, Mexico, and Atlantis are now tightly regulated. Unfortunately, at present only those travelers with expensive legal counsel and copious amounts of patience should consider such activities.

I hope these guidelines will help you make the most of your visit here. This planet can be a wonderful vacation spot, but we all must keep in mind that we are only visitors here. Take nothing but memories and cow genitals, and leave nothing but confused natives and enigmatic patterns in croplands. And let's keep those crop circle messages clean, by the way. It's just common courtesy. ○



CLASSICS OF FANTASY: "A CHRISTMAS CAROL"

That well-respected litterateur, Ebenezer Scrooge,
Liked to get to the nub of things quickly.
"Cut every word you can," he told his cringing students
At the Counting-House Writer's Workshop,
"And then keep on cutting 'til you bleed!"
He was a minimalist nonpareil.

So: One Christmas Eve, in what might have been a dream,
Or possibly an extended recursive passage,
He was visited by three didactic ghosts
Who presented two allegories and a dumbshow
Proving the past bad, the present worse,
The future worst of all.



Come morning, he blearily raised his head
 From the pillow of his keyboard,
 To confront the perfectly predictable plot twist of Christmas.
 Now the afflatus of Joyce dwelt in his heart,
 A windy and all-embracing verbosity
 Quite contrary to his metafictional theoretics.

But did his writing change? Hell, no!
 No child-exploiting industrialist held on to his discredited principles
 More tight-fistedly than did E. Scrooge.
 "Sentiment has no place in literature," he said.
 And "There is a difference yet
 Between Art and mere entertainment."

Scrooge went on to write fewer novels than Pynchon
 To less popular acclaim than Gaddis.
 The critics said various things,
 All of which he loathed.
 At last, he died and
 (as he himself would have put it)
 Not a word too soon.

—Jack O'Brien

Jack Skillingstead tells us that "The current offering represents my thirteenth appearance in the pages of *Asimov's*, the first having occurred in June 2003. I feel very lucky indeed." Luck, and possibly something stronger, may determine the fate of two people who meet as . . .

STRANGERS ON A BUS

Jack Skillingstead

A single passenger boarded the Greyhound in Idaho Falls: A young man in blue jeans, black T-shirt and leather jacket. Freya Hoepner, who was sitting beside one of the few unoccupied seats, glanced at him then looked down at the page of the book she wasn't reading. The words lay in meaningless order under her gaze. In her mind she heard other words, recently snarled at her: *Bitch*, and: *I'm done with you*, and: *Leave the fucking cat*.

For once in her life, she wanted to be alone.

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

She looked up. He wasn't so young after all, maybe forty. The man hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and there were dark discolorations under his eyes. But he was otherwise attractive, in a lost man-boy way that appealed to Freya despite her recent experience. She shrugged one shoulder and looked back at the meaningless page. The man sat beside her, invading the bubble into which she had retreated since leaving Seattle that morning.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"A book."

"Is it good?"

"It seems to be crap," Freya said.

Air brakes hissed, as if exasperated, and the bus lurched out of the station.

Heading south on I-15, Freya watched a wound open in the western sky. She was thinking about her cat, Mr. Pickwick. The cab had arrived, and Freya had stood in the alley behind the apartment building, holding her small suitcase in one hand and a cat treat in the other. She had called Picky's name over and over, tearfully, knees bent, hand outstretched. She had just wanted to say goodbye. Then Roger slapped the treat out of her hand and said, "Forget the fucking cat." Mr. Pickwick had been the last good thing she lost in Seattle, coming after her pride.

"Personally," said the man sitting beside her on the bus, "I prefer the classics."

"Excuse me?"

"Twain, Shakespeare, Tolstoy. Dickens. Over crap, I mean. Have you read Dickens?"

"Yes."

"No kidding? You never run into people who read real books. Hardly ever."

"I'm a teacher," Freya said.

"Where do you teach?"

"Nowhere. I quit. But I used to teach junior high school in Phoenix."

"Why'd you quit?"

Because I'm a fool, she thought.

"I suppose I was tired of it," she said.

"Eh. What's your favorite Dickens?"

Freya shrugged one shoulder again, not really wanting the conversation to continue.

"Mine's *David Copperfield*," the man said.

"Everybody says that," Freya said. "Or *Oliver Twist*."

"So what's yours? *Pickwick Papers*, I bet."

"God, no. *Our Mutual Friend*. *Pickwick* isn't even a novel."

"It isn't?"

"Look, I don't want to be rude, but—"

"It's okay if you don't feel like talking. I don't usually talk so much myself. It's interesting to look at people, though. Look at people I don't know and try to figure them out. Have you ever done that? My name's Neil, by the way."

"Freya," Freya said.

"That's unusual. I like that name. Hey, see that guy?"

Neil inclined his head toward her and dropped his voice. He pointed at a bald-headed, beefy man across the aisle, reading a magazine. Neil pointed in a funny way, his elbow tucked against his ribs, index finger slightly crooked, as if he were trying to point without pointing. Freya looked briefly at the bald-headed man. A gold ring glinted dully against his earlobe.

"If you had to make up something about him, what would it be?" Neil asked.

Freya wasn't in the mood. She drummed her fingers on the open page of the book, shook her head.

"A kid would probably make up a story about him being a professional wrestler," Neil said, "or maybe a genie, if the kid was young enough. But a grown-up would more likely think he's a biker, or a truck driver. Something like that. Of course he might also be a salesman, or a bee keeper, or an unemployed aerospace engineer. Something that goes against his appearance type. Not that it would matter what anybody made up, right? Since you'd never know him, he might as well be what you make up about him. In your mind there'd be no difference whether he was a broker or a genie. It's all the same. When you're thinking about him he's in *your* world. Do you know what I mean?"

"I don't think so."

Freya forced a smile, then looked out the window. She looked out the window until her neck started to hurt, until the sunset wound desaturat-

ed and twilight overtook the world. Finally, when she no longer sensed her seat companion waiting for her, she slowly faced forward, her neck painfully stiff, and closed her eyes, pretending sleep.

And then she did sleep—or dozed, anyway. But came forward out of troubled, disjointed, hectoring thoughts when she heard the man, Neil, weeping. She opened her eyes a crack, turned her head the merest portion of an inch. He was bent forward, his face in his hands, trying not to make a sound, his shoulders hitching with suppressed sobs. The bus rumbled along. Reading lights shone over random seats, but not theirs, not Freya and Neil's.

Freya rose out of her self-absorption. She became her Virginian urge to *help*. It was the same urge that had prompted her to answer Roger's instant message in the Yahoo chat room (ASTROLOGY 2). Roger who was always needling people, challenging their sincerity, their "hokey" beliefs. She thought she had perceived his *real* self; his insecure, unhappy, wounded nature. He could be so charming and vulnerable, once she penetrated his barriers. Right. Until she moved in and he became his *other* real self. The one who lapsed into thoughtless cruelty, who became controlling and angry, even during sex. So Freya's urge to help didn't always serve her well, but she could not resist it. Her one and only irresistible quality: She had to help.

Glancing at the bald man (genie-wrestler-trucker), Freya leaned over and, tentatively, touched Neil's back.

"Are you all right?"

Same thing she had asked Roger in her first private message.

Neil became very still. Freya withdrew her hand. Slowly, Neil sat back. In the dimness he appeared older (or maybe just his age), almost haggard with his shaggy head and old-man-tired eyes.

"I guess I'm not," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you up. Sorry."

"I was only resting my eyes," Freya said.

"I'm not usually such a baby. Or a blabbermouth, for that matter."

"That's all right. I'm having a bad day, too," she said. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong with yours? I'm a good listener, people say I am."

"You're a Virgo, I bet."

"Yes, that's right. And you can't resist my nurturing powers."

"I guess I can't."

She couldn't see his face clearly and it bothered her. She could *smell* him better than she could see him. Worn out leather, a trace of old sweat and cologne.

"How far are you traveling?" Freya asked.

"To the end of the road."

"And where is that? I think this bus turns around when it reaches Phoenix."

"I haven't decided yet. I haven't decided, and it's kind of scary. Man, I'm tired. You know, I used to really like people, but not so much anymore. Present company excepted." He flashed a perfunctory smile. "When I saw you I thought you looked nice. You also looked like you were leaving something, rather than going to something. You looked sad, I guess."

"Well—"

"Don't pay attention to me. I'm a little nuts."

"I hadn't noticed."

He laughed shortly out of his indistinct face. Freya reached up and turned on the reading light. That was better. Neil's eyes were red from crying and perhaps lack of sleep. He stared at her in an unblinking, probing way that made her feel like squirming. His skin was too white.

"Do you know what I am?" he asked.

"No, what are you?"

"I'm a freak," Neil said.

She tried to smile but couldn't pull it off.

"I tell myself stories," he said. "Like I was saying before. I make up stuff about people I don't know. Stories.

"That's not so freakish."

"Do you want to hear one?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't be afraid. It's okay."

"I'm not afraid."

Neil leaned closer and whispered: "Take a look at our friend, the wrestler."

Freya looked past Neil. The beefy bald man with the earring was balancing a laptop computer on his knees, scrolling the cursor around with a delicate movement of his stubby middle finger, like a child absorbed in finger paint.

"He's not a wrestler," Neil said. "He owns a small company that makes swimming-pool filtering equipment. He's moderately successful at it and he's thinking of opening a small manufacturing plant and distribution center in Phoenix. He's going there to meet with local investors. The reason he's taking the bus is he's scared to fly. It's practically a phobia with him. He hasn't been on an airplane since nine-eleven. He won't even take a train, because he's too cheap. He doesn't like to drive long distance, so he might as well bus it, right? Everybody's neurotic, that's my theory."

"I don't understand," Freya said, thinking Neil and the man across the aisle might have talked while she dozed. "Is any of that true?"

"It is now. I make stuff up about people, and then the people become the stuff I make up."

"I see."

Neil laughed. "God, I'm tired," he said.

"Why don't you sleep? I'll keep my eye on the swimming pool guy for you."

"It worries me to sleep."

"When I think about sleep," Freya said, "I worry about how vulnerable I am, my body lying there *breathing* by itself in a dark room. I guess that goes along with your 'everybody's neurotic' thing. What worries *you* about going to sleep?"

"I'm afraid that I tell stories in my sleep; and I'm kind of fixated on that guy. I have a story for him but I haven't told it yet. I don't want to tell it. But what if I do while I'm asleep?"

"I think it's safe for you to sleep." She patted his arm. "I'll watch out for things."

"All right." Neil reclined his seat and closed his eyes. "Freya?"

"Yes?"

"Don't worry about Mr. Pickwick."

Freya opened and closed her book a couple of times. She couldn't concentrate. Finally she gave up and put the book into her shoulder bag. Out the window a prairie slid past in moonlight. Beside her, Neil slept with his mouth open. The genie, or swimming pool salesman, or whatever he was, closed his computer and folded his hands over his thick waist.

After a while, Neil began to make small, anxious sounds in his sleep. Freya almost nudged him but didn't. She got up to use the bathroom, careful to step over Neil's feet. Making her way to the rear of the Greyhound, touching seatbacks on both sides of the aisle, she played the game. Faces in repose, white cords trailing from snugly placed ear buds; faces in conversation, in concentration, floating in reading light, swaying with the road, the dips and curves, the driver's minor adjustments. iPod girl is a college kid going home to visit her parents for the weekend; this guy's a plumber, owns a cocker spaniel named Munchkin; this hippie-looking guy is a burglar who ritualistically smokes a joint after every job. No: he smokes one *while* he's doing a job, lights up in the victim's living room and leaves the roach on the kitchen table, like a calling card, almost hoping his DNA will get him convicted someday.

And so on.

The shapes occupying seats without reading lights were faceless ciphers. They could be *anything*.

In the tiny closet at the back of the bus Freya sat on the toilet and cried. She cried because she had surrendered her secret heart to Roger, a man she hardly knew, left her life in Phoenix (not that much to leave, admittedly, but was she *that* desperate, for God's sake?), and wound up alone anyway. And lucky to be that way. It wasn't a matter of knowing Roger, or anybody else; it was a matter of someone, anyone, knowing *her*. Wanting to know her. To understand her intimately, to be interested in *her* life. But Roger had only been good at *acting* like he was interested. It had taken everything she had to go to him, to sever herself from life in Phoenix. She hadn't expected him to bring out the handcuffs, hadn't expected him to *want* to hurt her; usually she got hurt as a consequence of her trusting vulnerability. Somehow she always found the "wrong" man, in her relentless search for a new daddy, one who wanted her, who wouldn't leave. Mythical man.

She wiped and flushed, stood up. In the mirror, her face drew down toward middle age.

Is this all I am?

She slept fitfully, her head resting against the window, the cool flat glass vibrating, bouncing with the road, bucketing along above sleep's deeper threshold.

The sun woke her. She squinted, worked her mouth. The bus was pulling into the parking lot of a diner. The sign at the turn-off looked like a big metal cactus the color of a pickle: KACTUS KATE'S! COME IN AND GET COOL!

"Forty-five minutes for breakfast," the driver said over the P.A.

Neil smiled at her. He looked better after his rest. He looked like somebody she could like. Except, she reminded herself, she was done picking up strays.

"Welcome to Arizona," Neil said. He sounded resigned.

They filed off the bus. With the engine stopped it was suddenly very

hot. Neil removed his leather coat and carried it by the collar. Freya blotted her forehead with the back of her hand. The swimming pool guy shuffled down the aisle between them, his short-sleeved cotton shirt stuck to his back in dark patches. Freya couldn't take her eyes off the tight roll of fat on the back of the man's neck.

She sat on a stool and the counter man took her order for scrambled eggs, toast, and orange juice. The swimming pool guy hunched over a *USA Today* a few stools down, but he stared at it the way Freya had stared at her book, as if it were written in Chinese. She wondered what words he was hearing, what voices.

Neil sat at a corner table by himself. The lost man-boy. He had a cup of coffee in front of him but no food. Freya sipped her orange juice and glanced over occasionally. Every time she did, Neil happened to be glancing at *her*, even as he tore open packets of sugar and emptied them into his cup.

When her eggs arrived, Freya picked up her juice and plate and carried them to Neil's table.

"May I?"

"Sure." He waved a packet at the empty chair, scattering white sugar crystals. Freya brushed the seat off and sat down.

"Are you feeling better today?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

"Good. I was thinking about something. I was thinking about how you said don't worry about Mr. Pickwick."

Neil smiled slightly.

"You don't know it, but it was kind of coincidental. I had a cat named Mr. Pickwick. I know you were talking about the Dickens, from before. But it's still a coincidence. It's almost synchronicity, but not quite, I think. Am I making sense?"

"You are. But not in the way you think you are."

"And what way would that be?"

"I wasn't talking about Dickens, when I said the Pickwick thing. I meant don't worry about your cat."

"Oh, really."

"Yeah."

"I—"

"There he goes."

Freya turned, almost expecting to see the yellow tabby padding across the diner. But it was the beefy bald guy of a thousand identities, or three anyway. He walked past, looking grim, and went into the men's room.

"You're quite taken with the swimming-pool salesman," she said.

"Filters," Neil said. "Anyway, he doesn't do that anymore."

"No?"

"No. I had a bad dream, I think. I can't remember it, but I know what I was thinking before I went to sleep. And I know I dreamed about something scary that I desired. There's that residue in my mind, no specifics."

Freya studied his face, looking for a clue that he was kidding, or setting her up for a punch line. No such clues were evident.

"So you dreamed he wasn't a filter salesman and now he isn't?"

"Yeah."

"What is he now?"

"A poor slob whose wife left him last week and took his sweet daughter with her. He also lost his job, after showing up drunk for his morning shift and punching out his supervisor. This surprised both of them. Until then he hadn't seemed like the violent type, despite the guns."

"What guns?"

"Well, he's always been a little paranoid and scared. More so than anybody ever guessed. He keeps a gun in the glove box of his Ford and a couple more in the house, plus a .38 in an ankle holster, like he's a secret agent or something, except he isn't. Not by a long shot. Shot's kind of a pun. I used to tell nice stories about people, right? Now it's mostly depressing stuff. Those eggs look good."

"You should order some," Freya said.

"There isn't time."

She thought he meant there wasn't time before the bus left. But then, looking at him, at his haunted eyes, she knew he meant something else. Something terrible, maybe.

"So you think you know about Mr. Pickwick."

"Yes."

"Then tell me what it is about his eyes."

"Eye. Not eyes. Did you ever think of dressing him like a pirate for Halloween?"

Freya put her fork down. "That was a good guess."

"It wasn't a guess. I told you—I make up stories about strangers, and then the strangers *become* the story I made up. I don't want to do it, but I can't help myself anymore. The stories happen. It's like a reaction. Instinctive Inventive Reaction, I call it."

"Eye Eye Are. Er?"

He laughed, and the haunted look fell away, briefly.

"I like you," he said, "which is too bad. I'm kind of out of the people-liking business."

"Me, too. Or I thought I was."

"Because of Roger dodger?"

She stared at him.

"Yeah," he said, "I know all about him."

She sipped her orange juice, put the glass down. "I probably said his name in my sleep."

Neil shook his head. "Nope."

"Don't tell me you made up a story about *me*."

"I could prove it, but in a couple of minutes it won't matter."

She moved her glass around the table, sliding it on a film of moisture. After a moment she raised her eyes.

"Go ahead and prove it."

"You're a junior high school teacher from Phoenix," Neil said.

"I told you that."

"Right," Neil said. "But you didn't tell me about Roger."

Freya waited, suspended between expectations. Her heart was beating faster.

"You didn't tell me you met him in a chat room, and that you started a relationship with him that progressed to phone calls and then to visits. You

didn't tell me that he seemed to know all your secret places, that he convinced you that he was in love with you, and that you quit your job and moved to Seattle. You didn't tell me that he turned out to be a manipulating, needy asshole who liked to hurt people, especially you. And you didn't tell me that after a while it was you and Mr. Pickwick versus asshole Roger. The cat was a stray, and you took it in. Because even though you were living with the guy you felt dreadfully lonely. Worse than you had felt back home in Phoenix, and that was pretty bad. You didn't tell me that asshole Roger threw a full bottle of Bud at the cat and hit it in the ass, and that Mr. Pickwick ran for his life out of that apartment, which is when you decided you had to do the same. You didn't tell me that when the cab was waiting to take you to the bus station a couple of days later, after all the yelling and tears and threats, that you still couldn't find Mr. Pickwick, though you'd seen him slinking around the alley. And asshole Roger made you get in the cab without your cat, and you did it because you were scared. Another stray that got away and went feral. You didn't tell me any of that, did you?"

"No," Freya said, her voice very small.

"See?" he said.

"It's a trick." She felt naked, publicly exposed. "You hypnotized me or something, back on the bus, and I told you all that."

"Yeah. It's a trick. I'm The Amazing Neil."

"You don't know me," Freya said.

"You're right. I don't know who you really are. But you know what's funny? *You* don't know who you really are, either. Not anymore."

"That isn't funny, Neil."

He looked down. "No, it isn't. I'm sorry."

His eyes shifted to the men's room.

"Why do you keep looking over there?"

"No reason."

Freya looked at the men's room door.

"Now you've got *me* doing it," she said.

"Anyway," Neil said, "you don't have to worry about your cat."

"Maybe I never even had a cat. Maybe you just planted that idea in my head." Her heart ached a little when she said it. Mr. Pickwick, as opposed to Roger, had been a comfort to her. It wasn't even the cat she missed; it was the comfort. Another stray gone feral.

"Is that what you think?" Neil said. "That I 'planted' Mr. Pickwick in your mind?"

"No."

"Because that isn't what I do," he said. "I don't plant things."

"What *do* you do, then?"

"I see somebody, and his or her face suggests a little story. So I listen to the story, add to it, embellish it. This only takes a few seconds. And the little story isn't the *whole* story. It just gets things rolling."

"You make people be something they're not."

"No. I give them lives they could have had but didn't. Or maybe they had them in parallel dimensions, or a previous incarnation. Who knows? I don't *make* anybody do anything. I wish I could. I've tried it." His mouth turned down in a sour scowl.

"What happened?" Freya asked.

He shrugged. "There was a girl."

He picked up his mug with both hands and slurped coffee. She thought he was pausing to gather his thoughts, but a minute went by, and he only stared, holding the mug up to his chin, elbows on the table, his eyes focused inward.

"What about the girl?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Tell me. Please."

"You already think I'm nutty," he said.

She did her one-shoulder shrug, but it was the other shoulder.

"Her name was Lynn," he said. "She was totally random, nobody I knew or was likely to know. I was walking into a bank in Spokane, and she was walking out. One of those revolving doors. Her face. Oh, man, was she cute—but very sad-looking. And a story begins spinning itself out, something about a divorce, an empty bank account, embarrassment, a brave face, and a fast exit. At which point I tried to take control of the story. I put myself into it, which I think screwed it up. I'm the outsider, right? I don't ever have a story to be in, not with anybody else. Anyway, I followed her down the block and found her crying in front of a Starbuck's. And it was like she was *so glad* that I stopped and asked if she was all right. I have a kind face, non-threatening? I've heard that before. How far does a so-called kind face get you? It doesn't matter. I'm totally used to being alone, I'm accustomed to the idea. With Lynn I reminded her of her high school crush, the one she always wished had asked her out but never did."

"That was mean," Freya said. "Making her believe that."

His eyes widened innocently. "I didn't intend it to be mean. I just wanted to meet her. I wanted her to like me."

"Maybe she would have liked you anyway, without you changing all her memories around."

"I doubt it. People tend to look right though me, Freya. Especially women. Anyway, I bought her a coffee, and we talked. She really was a sweet girl."

"What about the bank account, why was it empty?"

"It wasn't."

"But you said—"

"That was *before*. Once I intentionally added myself, the backstory changed, too. She told me she was crying because she was thinking about her best friend, who had told her she had breast cancer. Nothing to do with the bank."

Freya thought for a minute.

"What if the empty account story was never real?"

"It would have been, if I'd left it alone."

"You're guessing it would have been. But maybe the stories in your head *don't* become real. Maybe they're just stories in your head. Did she *tell* you that you reminded her of the high school crush?"

Neil looked at his coffee mug. "No."

"See? Maybe she liked you for being you, for bothering to stop and ask if she was all right. For your kind face, even. Is that so outlandish? Maybe you don't have any weird power."

"You're forgetting something."

"What?"

The men's room door opened. Neil tensed, slopping coffee over the rim of his mug, then relaxed when the pony-tailed hippy-looking guy stepped out, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"What, what is it?" Freya asked.

Neil slumped, placed his mug on the table. He rubbed his eyes.

"What you're *forgetting* is all that stuff I know about you. The cat, Roger, the rough sex, all that."

Freya blushed. "Maybe—"

"Maybe what?"

"I was thinking, maybe it's that you read minds?"

"I don't *read minds*." He looked disgusted "Jesus, that pseudoscience stuff is reaching."

"It makes more sense than the other thing. There's at least *some* scientific basis for mind-reading." (She was remembering an *X-Files* episode).

"What if you read minds without even knowing it? So you think it's a story you're making up, but it's the truth to begin with. What about that?"

He gave her a weary up-from-under look.

"Never mind," Freya said. "What happened with your bank girl?"

"I told you: Nothing."

"You didn't go out, or see her again?"

"No. She wouldn't have wanted to see me again. I just caught her at a vulnerable moment."

"That's a dumb way to think," Freya said. "Trust me. You know what your problem is?"

"Tell me, I think I need to hear it."

"You're afraid to let anybody know who you really are." (She was thinking of a Dr. Phil book, but that didn't invalidate the point).

"Something funny? I don't even know who I am. A long time ago—a *long* time ago, I think, I started telling stories about *myself*. Maybe it was because I was always alone, it seemed like, when I was a kid. It wasn't such a happy home, all that crap you might expect. So I'd make stuff up, to escape. And the stuff was in my dreams, too. Maybe mostly in my dreams. You know dreams, there's no bullshit. It's the unconscious, giving up what we think we deserve. But there's something else—and you're really going to think I'm nutty—but I think when I started out I wasn't even human. Because about half the time I don't feel human even now."

"Neil?"

"Yeah?"

"You're nutty."

He laughed.

"I *told* you," he said. "You should have believed me."

"How could you not be human? What else *is* there?"

"Listen. I travel around a lot. I used to like big cities, because there were so many people, so it seemed like it was less lonely, but it wasn't. I'd hang out in my crappy apartment, go out to coffee shops, the movies, but I was always by myself. All those other people, it got depressing. So then I went the small town route. Like I had this idea it'd be Mayberry, you

know, Andy Griffith, all that. But it wasn't. People in those towns are suspicious as hell about outsiders. So I thought about going the Kerouac/Dharma bum route, but I couldn't get worked up about it. I feel like I'm at the end of my options. I'm *tired*."

"How come you get to live in all these different places? What do you do for money?"

"I'm a writer."

"Ah."

"You mean *ah-ha*. Right? Well, you're wrong. It's natural that I'd be a writer. Like if you have a talent for constructive empathy you might be a counselor, or even a teacher, for instance. I have a talent for making stuff up."

"Well, Neil."

"What?"

"The last time I looked, writers are humans like the rest of us."

"Most of them are, I guess. Personally I don't get along with the ones I know. They're all kind of weird."

"Thank goodness you're not."

"Yeah, thank goodness."

"So what did you mean by not being human?"

"You ever see *2001*, that Kubrick movie?"

"Of course."

"Remember at the end, the Star Child is floating in space above the Earth? That's what I think sometimes."

"What is what you think sometimes?"

"That I started out like that, like some kind of Star Child, and I was having a dream and the dream became a planet, and the planet became populated with all these really interesting beings full of possibilities and contradictions, and it looked like so much fun I dropped into the dream myself, but I never really fit. And when I sleep, because I'm so lonely and insane, my unconscious desires to just *wreck* the whole thing boil up, and we get wars and pestilence and all that. What do you think?"

"I think you think too much."

"Jesus, I hate it when people say that. How can anybody think 'too much'?"

"Wait a minute. What *kind* of writer are you?"

"I suppose if I told you I was a science fiction writer you'd do a double *ah-ha*."

"Are you a science fiction writer?"

"I saw a revival of that movie when I was a little kid," Neil said, as if she'd asked him a different question. "My mom dropped me off, by myself. I think because the movie was so long. Like to get rid of me for a while? Well, who can blame her?"

"Was your father around?"

Neil didn't answer. He looked at the men's room door and chewed his lip.

"What is it with the bathroom?" Freya said.

"That genie-looking son of a bitch."

"What about him?"

"On the bus I was afraid I'd dream something bad if I fell asleep, something I was afraid of but wanted very much. And I think I did that. All I know is, I mean I wanted to die. Freya, I wanted to die. I was tired of everybody else's life and not having one of my own, my true one. Never

knowing who I was supposed to be, never having a companion. I had even started resenting other people's lives, hating them. Why should I go on living, why should anybody else get to? You know the drill. That kind of solipsistic crap they find in somebody's note after the latest massacre. I mean that isn't what I *wanted*, but it might be what my secret warped unconscious heart wanted. And that guy, that genie guy, I think he's going to give me my wish, my secret desire. Because he's at the end of *his* rope, too, and he's ready to go off. He's ready to go off like a stick of dynamite. You better get out of here, Freya. Right now."

The men's room door banged open, and the bald man appeared.

Freya grabbed Neil's hand, and he squeezed it hard enough to grind the bones.

The bald man walked by their table, looking glum, and resumed his seat at the counter. A few minutes later the driver announced it was time to board.

Freya swallowed. "Maybe your warped unconscious heart dreamed up some *other* secret desire you're afraid of," she said.

He stared at her.

On the Greyhound traveling southwest through the desert, Freya said: "What are you going to do when we get to Phoenix?"

"I don't know. Get back on the bus? I don't really like hot weather that much."

"Why don't you hang around a while? It's a dry heat, you know."

"So I've heard."

"Neil?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you really know all those things about me and Roger?"

"I hypnotized you."

"That's what I thought."

"Really?"

"No. I'm going with the mind-reading idea."

They sat quietly for a while, which was easy and comfortable. Freya got her book out but didn't open it. She tapped the cover.

"To think," she said, "I used to like this crap."

"Shocking."

"I mean before I transformed into the Freya from a parallel dimension with better taste. Thanks, by the way. 'Fear and desire,' she quoted, reading the dust jacket copy.

"Who needs it?" Neil said.

"Right."

She dropped the book on the floor and nudged it under the seat with her foot.

"I'll leave it for the next passenger."

They rode along, and after a while Neil closed his hand over hers and squeezed it gently. Not like in the diner, when he thought a homicidal maniac, a monster from his id, was going to come out of the men's room with guns blazing.

"The fear part, anyway," he said.

"What?"

"Who needs it," he said. O

The author's forthcoming books include an SF novel from Tor, *Steal Across the Sky*; a bio-thriller, *Dogs*, from Tachyon Publications; and a collection *Nano Comes to Clifford Falls and Other Stories*, from Golden Gryphon Press. In her latest tale for *Asimov's*, Nancy takes a grim look at what it takes to follow . . .

THE RULES

Nancy Kress

Carmody surveyed the house clinging to the side of a steep hill and surrounded by three hundred acres of the haunting gold-green of a New England spring. A modest enough house, considering the owner. Vaguely rustic but not pushing the point. The weather vane on the top was a nice satiric touch. *Which way is the wind blowing for you now, you old reprobate?*

He walked the last of the driveway by himself, over the strenuous objections of his bodyguard. By the time he reached the portico, all of his electronics had ceased working. The door opened before he could push the bell. Somehow, Carmody wasn't surprised to see Tartell himself on the other side.

Tartell sat in an elaborate powerchair with neck braces. In his wasted hands trembled the house remote. The second Carmody stepped inside, saw the layout, and smelled the air, he realized his mistake. This wasn't a rustic home, no matter what it looked like from the outside. Nor was it the secret command headquarters he'd expected. This was a hospital, and Tartell was finally dying.

"Hello, Arthur," Tartell said. "I've been expecting you."

It had begun five days earlier, on Monday evening. In Cleveland, Ohio, Ron DiSarto finished his dinner of Soy Surprise, kissed his wife on the top of her head as she fed the baby in the bunny-patterned high chair, and went through to the living room.

"This is NBC News live from New York, with Tanya Jones—" Tanya Jones, smiling professionally, vanished.

"What the . . ." DiSarto said. For a long moment his TV filled with snow.

Then a picture burst into view, a village of wood-and-mud huts in a bare, sere landscape. A voice-over said urgently, "This is Nakmu, in Kenya, and this is Saya." Close-up of a one-armed child with a heartbreaking smile. "Saya was mutilated by the band of robbers who burned down her hut and killed her parents."

DiSarto frowned. Okay, it was a human interest story, or maybe a commercial for one of those do-good outfits like Amnesty International. He called, "Brenda, bring me a beer, honey, will ya?"

The commercial said, "Saya's life was saved by a donation from Mr. and Mrs. James Sellers of Atlanta, Georgia, and a prosthetic arm is being paid for by Ms. Cassie DuForte of New York City."

DiSarto sighed and reached for the remote to change the channel. He wanted real news. Although, come to think of it, it was a bit odd that individual people were being mentioned like that on—

The exact same program was on ABC and CBS.

"Brenda!" DiSarto called but she was already beside him, juggling the baby and the beer.

"Don't yell, I'm right here."

"Look at this! It's on all three networks, exactly the same!"

"—medical clinic run by the Sisters of Charity Mission." Shots of children huddled two and three to a bed, of empty supply shelves. "—three hundred doses of penicillin, paid for by Mr. Carl Venters of London, England. Saya—"

"And it's not ending!" DiSarto said. "This is no commercial. Do you think somebody is actually fucking with the airwaves?"

"—new dress, her only one, paid for by—"

"The FCC must be having a cow!"

"That poor little girl," Brenda said, patting the baby on the back. "God, she's cute. Ronnie, we could afford the cost of a second dress for her. How much could a dress cost?"

In the WRKC control booth, an NBC affiliate in Tampa, Florida, technicians worked frantically at their stations. "I can't override it!"

"What do you mean 'can't'? Get that damn thing off the air and Tanya Jones back on!" The chief engineer pushed the tech aside. The signal was coming in from the outside and somehow it had seized, or replaced, WRKC's frequency. How the hell could anything. . . ?

The engineer tried everything he knew, including cutting off the live feed from New York and substituting an old episode of *Gilligan's Island*. Nothing worked. Saya and the African village and the Sisters of Charity played for twenty minutes, ending with a title screen:

COMPASSION CHANNEL
SEND DONATIONS DIRECTLY TO
SISTERS OF CHARITY MEDICAL CLINIC
ALL CURRENCIES WELCOME!

YOU WILL BE TOLD EXACTLY WHAT YOUR HELP PURCHASES!

With an address in Kenya.

The title screen stayed on for fifteen seconds.

"Chief, we got New York on the phone!"

Thirty seconds.

"They say other affiliates got the same signal!"

Forty-five seconds.

"Not just in the East, either—maybe every station in the country!"

Sixty full seconds, an eternity in television. Of an unauthorized still shot! On his station!

No technology could do that. The chief engineer stared blankly at the Mission address.

"We know the signal comes through Chinese satellites," Carmody said, "and of course with the political situation the way it is, we can't touch them."

"Really?" Tartell said. "Coffee, Arthur?"

"Yes, please." Carmody was curious to see who would serve. It was a young Hispanic girl that he recognized from StarCorps' extensive surveillance: Juanita Perez. Legal Mexican immigrant, minimal English, IQ of about ninety. The coffee was excellent.

"I regret I can't join you," Tartell said. "Medical restrictions."

"You must have given the Chinese an enormous chunk of change."

Tartell merely smiled.

"Total override of all news shows for twenty minutes for the last five nights, right up until it was time for sports and weather. Which genius at which of your subsidiary companies developed the software, Glenn?"

Another smile.

"Oh, for God's sake," Carmody snapped, "We know your tech can prevent or erase any recording inside this house. How stupid do you think I am?"

"Pretty stupid," Tartell said, "but not about technology."

Carmody held up five fingers. "Kenya. Morocco. Argentina. Uzbekistan. Myanmar. One per night, each focused on a particular dirt-poor village, a particular child, and a charitable organization absolutely above suspicion. Superb production values, great story-telling. Hundreds of thousands of dollars pouring in, and you now have 88 percent of Americans watching your illegal broadcasts, breathless to see if the FCC can stop you."

Tartell had a sudden breathing fit. His head jerked within the power-chair braces and his face turned ashy blue. Carmody stood and Juanita rushed in, but by the time she got to Tartell, his chair had snaked a gas mask up over the old man's face. Tartell breathed deeply and the gasping subsided.

"Sorry," Tartell wheezed.

Carmody sat down again, leaning forward in his seat. Tartell's dying was not going to deter anything. "Glenn—what the hell are you really after?"

Sister Hélène-Marie sank to her arthritic knees before the statue of Notre Mère Bénie in the dim, mud-walled chapel. *Enfin*, it was a miracle! Clothes for the children, drugs for the clinic, a computer with a satellite uplink to get real answers from real doctors! Never had she dared pray

for such riches. When she thought of the lives this could save, tears came to her old eyes. And the food pouring in—not soysynth but real food, such as Sister Hélène-Marie had not tasted in years and the poor villagers, never.

"Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de graces. . ."

"There's one in here!"

Light exploded into the chapel. Someone said, "Sorry, Sister, we just...uh...le crew..."

Merde!

Sister Hélène-Marie clasped her hands in penance, even though she hadn't spoken the curse aloud. But these people . . . they were everywhere! So many people, so many cameras . . . Nakmu had never seen so many visitors, nor could it support so many. With them came litter and waste and confusion and intrusion . . . and money.

Ashamed of her ungrateful thoughts, Sister Hélène-Marie struggled to her feet and forced a smile. These strangers in their desert suits and Netspecs were also God's children.

"Just a few quick shots, Sister, just go right back to praying. . ."

The hot dry wind from the desert, which had been fertile grassland when Sister Hélène-Marie had come to this part of Kenya, blew through the open chapel door. The omnipresent dust swirled over her trousers, into her eyes. But obediently she knelt once more. This, too, must be part of God's plan.

"Sister, do you think you could cry from joy? Arnie, move that light over there. . ."

Sister Hélène-Marie prayed for patience.

"What are you really after?" Carmody repeated.

Tartell said, "Maybe those broadcasts—whoever's they are—are just trying to help people find their souls."

"Bullshit."

"I hear," Tartell wheezed, his sunken blue eyes sly, "that 312 American families have offered to adopt Saya."

Carmody said dryly, "People can get a little hysterical when admiring their own compassion. But we're finding it a bit hard to believe you're expending your fortune, plus the technological breakthrough of the century, merely to get a handful of third-world orphans into good homes."

"Well, you would find that hard to believe, wouldn't you?"

"Don't play games with me, Glenn. They're all desert communities. All five of them."

"Man-made deserts, you mean."

"Call them what you will. Do you know how many people have traveled to Nakmu and the other four villages in the last week? Impossible to check them all out. News organizations from around the world. Telecom companies. Government security agencies. None of them care about the villages—they care about how you did it."

"Oh, surely not," Tartell said. "After all, they don't suspect that it was I who allegedly 'did it.' If that were so, they'd all be camped here on my doorstep. Instead, there's only you."

"I know you, Glenn. I've tracked you for forty years."

"Yes, you have," Tartell said mildly. "More coffee, Arthur?"

"It's the deserts, isn't it? And what next?"

"Juanita could bring some cake, if you'd like."

Moving very slowly, so as to alarm no security equipment, Carmody drew a folder from his suit pocket.

The sixth night, Saturday, Ron and Brenda DiSarto invited some friends over for the broadcast. It had become a game. "Bet you tonight the feds shut down the Compassion Channel," Ron said.

"You're on," said Maddie Lomax. "What odds you giving?"

Ted Smith said, "In Las Vegas it's three to one for shut-down."

"I'll give you two to one," Maddie said. "Ten dollars."

"You got it. Brenda, honey, we're ten dollars richer."

The three couples circled the DiSartos' TV, shouting "Four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . go!"

"This is NBC News live from New York with Tanya Jones—" Tanya Jones, her expression somewhere between resigned and outraged, vanished.

"Give me my twenty!" Maddie crowed, as the screen filled with a village of wood-and-mud huts in a bare, sere landscape. The voice-over said, "This is Nakmu, in Kenya, this is Saya . . .

"Hey, it's a repeat," Jim Lomax said.

"No, it's not," Brenda said. "Listen!"

". . . and this is the reason that, until recently, Saya was starving. This is the New Kenyan Desert." Shot of desolate blowing sand. "But twenty years ago, the Great Kenyan Desert looked like this." Grasslands, a town, a shallow river, healthy children splashing and shouting.

Maddie said, "Oh, God, it's one of those boring global-warming specials."

"This is Peoria, Illinois, right now," the voice-over said, "and this is what Peoria will look like in twenty years as the American Midwest undergoes desertification."

"Turn it off," Maddie said.

"No, wait," Karen Smith said. "My sister lives in Peoria."

"Peoria." A partial desert. "New York." The water, already rising over Battery Park, flooded Wall Street. "Kansas City." Another creeping desert. "And this will be Washington, D.C."—and the screen exploded into sound so loud and light so bright that Brenda screamed. A huge mushroom cloud filled the screen, followed by a scan of destroyed buildings, writhing bodies, and miles of nothing but rubble. "Does anyone," said the voice-over, "really believe that if resources get much scarcer, it won't lead to nuclear war? If you were a third-world country with the bomb and all your children were starving, what would you do? Anything. You'd do anything at all."

"That's no National Geographic Special!" Ron said. "Jesus!"

"And the deserts are the *key*. Reverse desertification and maybe we can feed everyone again, water everyone, provide homes for everyone. Maybe. The experts say that's no longer possible, that the climate changes from

global warming are irreversible. But maybe . . . just maybe . . . they're wrong."

Carmody opened the folder, a simple blue paper with no markings, and laid it flat on Tartell's lap. The old man lowered his chin to gaze downward at the two pieces of paper side by side. One slid onto the floor and Carmody bent to replace it. "Can you read at that distance, Glenn?"

"Well enough," Tartell said.

After a moment Carmody said, "You knew we'd find this."

"Yes."

"How did you build these companies, Arthur? We know when, and who's at each, but not *how*. There are no paper trails, no Net traces—and considering that you've hired not one but three Nobel Laureates in India, that's a little amazing. How did you do it?"

"It cost a great deal."

"I can imagine. What are they working on? No, I don't imagine you'd tell me. But the TV programs that you've got everyone so worked up about—they're just initial PR, aren't they? Little maimed Saya and darling Ahmed and wells for Argentine villages and all the rest. Just to secure your audience and get them to trust you. It's the deserts you're after. But why? They're just a symptom."

"Using the word 'symptom' admits that you see a problem," Tartell said.

Carmody smiled. "Or an opportunity. What's going to happen, Arthur?"

"Wrong tense, I'm afraid. It's happening already."

Sister Hélène-Marie needed to get away. Simply *needed* to. These people—they were everywhere! And now, added to all the rest, had come an American couple of truly astonishing persistence, who wanted to adopt Saya. They had arrived in a private plane this morning, they seemed to have more money than the Holy Father, and they did not believe, or pretended to not believe, that Sister Hélène-Marie could not arrange an adoption with a single phone call to Nairobi. To what was left of Nairobi.

She didn't put on a full desert suit. Her flowing white trouser-habit would do for the short time she would be gone. But she did don boots and mask. The ultraviolet indicator was very high today, as was the CO₂ level, and those nasty little *bêtes*, the sandworms, were spreading like sin.

Feeling a little sinful herself, Sister Hélène-Marie ducked out the back door of the Mission kitchen and, shielded by the outhouses and then by the ridiculous bulk of the visitors' planes and helicopters, walked rapidly out into the desert. So dangerous, so vast—and so peaceful. Had not Our Lord spent fruitful time praying in the desert? Not that Sister Hélène-Marie could spend forty days here, of course, because, for one thing, the sand worms made it very dangerous to sit down.

But there *was* someone sitting down, in the distance.

She lifted her arm to shade her eyes. No, the figure, in full desert suit, was not sitting down but rather was crouching. It was difficult to see more because the sand and rock were so bright . . .

Too bright.

Sister Hélène-Marie could hardly bear to look to the west. The desert

there was much, much brighter than to the east or south or north. To be certain of that, she turned in a slow circle, squinting above her mask. *Much* brighter.

The figure straightened and raised an arm. One of the desert rovers, ubiquitous since this last week, rolled into view over the horizon.

The west grew brighter still.

Tartell said, "Before you go any farther, Arthur, let me match your impressive sleuthing, if you don't mind a—" Another gasping fit took him.

This one, Carmody could see, was much worse. Tartell turned purple, even after the oxygen mask shot up to his face. His whole frail body twitched and a terrible noise, low and inhuman, came from the back of his throat. *Death rattle*, Carmody thought, jumping to his feet. Juanita rushed in, followed by a white-coated man, and now Carmody could hear an alarm ringing in back rooms of the building.

The doctor adjusted several dials on Tartell's chair and, before Carmody's very eyes, the old man returned to life. So it was not oxygen alone in that canister. But surely stimulants and brainies were dangerous to someone so weak . . . Tartell was throwing the last of his life onto an artificially enhanced bonfire, so that it might burn brightly for the length of this interview.

Nothing could have shown better the lengths to which the old man was prepared to go.

Ice slid down Carmody's spine.

" . . . what will happen to Saya." The TV screen showed the Sisters of Charity Mission as a ghost town. Desert wind blew between abandoned, eroded buildings. Blew and blew and blew, swirling the sand. The camera pulled back for a long shot, and the desert kept growing and growing, until the shot was so high that features were barely distinguishable. Then a sudden cut to a close-up: the skeleton of a child, half-covered with sand.

"Oh, cheesy," Maddie Lomax said.

"But . . ." Brenda hesitated. "It could happen. If the desert really *is* going to cover more and more land. . . ."

Jim Lomax said sarcastically, "Like you haven't heard that before?"

Ron DiSarto didn't like Jim speaking to his wife in that tone of voice. Ron said harshly, "It's different when you see it like this!"

And, all of a sudden, it was.

"Well, somebody should do something," Karen Smith said. "Before it's really too late. My sister in Peoria . . . and that bomb in D.C. . . ." She shuddered.

"It's just a simulation!" Jim said.

"Even so," Karen said, and both her husband and Brenda DiSarto nodded.

Tartell, his color almost normal, waved off Juanita and the doctor, who both left reluctantly. Tartell pressed a button on his powerchair and a wallscreen lit up. Carmody studied the display, hiding his shock.

He'd underestimated the situation. Tartell knew about StarCorps' water irrigation companies and salvage operations, but Carmody had ex-

pected that. Carmody had even expected his old adversary to know about the land buys through the Panamanian dummy corporation, all that cheap coastal land under a foot of water. The owners couldn't afford to build dikes or drainage pumps . . . but StarCorps could. However, Carmody hadn't expected Tartell to know about the food-supply buy-ups in ten famished countries, buy-ups that had so artificially inflated the price of food. Or the hostile take-overs of six biotech companies on the verge of genetically engineered "rescue crops" that now would not see market. And certainly not to know about the political alliances to block organic climate modulators in the British Isles, which was now satisfactorily advancing into a state inhospitable for sheep. StarCorps had big plans for an economically destabilized England.

There were so many ways to make a profit when a civilization crashed.

Carmody got out, "All right, Arthur. I have very broad authorization to ensure silence. How much do you want?"

"You better wait until you see something else," Tartell said and pressed another button on his chair. The screen flashed into moving life.

In her youth Sister Hélène-Marie had been a good walker. Now she covered briskly the miles to the edge of the bright-white area to the west. It was a risk, of course, but she had a half canteen of water at her waist and her brand-new radio phone in her pocket.

As she neared the bright-white, it shone even more. Sister Hélène-Marie's sunglasses were inadequate, but they were all she had. Shielding her eyes with her arm, she strode on. She wasn't sure what she expected to find, but certainly not what she did.

The bright-white consisted of millions of tiny particles. Carefully Sister Hélène-Marie got to her knees and scooped up a handful. Brittle, brilliantly iridescent, in the shadow of her hand they looked like nothing at all. But lying all together on the ground, they shone with reflected sunlight like . . . like . . . she didn't know what.

The edge of the bright-white was growing.

Even as she crouched on her heels, holding up her rough habit so that only her boot soles touched the desert floor, the bright-white edged visibly closer to her thickly shod toes. And overhead she heard the first of the news helicopters, swooping in lower for a closer look.

"They're excreted by genetically engineered micro-organisms that replicate at a fantastic rate," Tartell said. His voice had become thick, the words forced out by sheer will. "With sufficiently strong sunlight, they pull nutrients from rock and sand, and can manage a generative division every fifteen minutes. Nearly all their energy not going for reproduction goes to secrete a thin, top-side external coating. Think of nacre created by marine animals, but much, much faster. The albedo of the coating is 10 percent greater than ice. The area of desert land that they will cover should, in less than six months, equal the melted ice sheets on Antarctica and Greenland. Polar ice is so reflective that 90 percent of the sunlight that strikes it is reflected back into space, taking its heat with it. As a counter-effect to—"

"I know what effect it will have," Carmody snapped. Jesus! Trapped greenhouse gases were what was warming the planet. If enough energy radiated back into space—something no one had thought possible—if *that* happened . . .

"The feds will swoop down on you like all the furies of hell," Carmody said. "The UN. The International Emergency Effort Alliance. The . . . Good God, Arthur! You'll cover the whole planet in mother-of-pearl!"

"No," Tartell gasped. "There's a terminator gene built in. It'll only cover the deserts."

"You can't do this! Public opinion alone—"

"Are you sure about that?"

The DiSartos' guests had adjourned to the poker table. Beer, chips, hearty camaraderie to cover the awkward moments in the living room. Ron had even left the TV on; Maddie Lomax liked to hear *Wheel of Fortune*.

"Raise you a quarter," Jim said.

"I fold," from Brenda.

"See you and call," Ted said. "Read 'em and weep."

"Your pot," Ron said. "Does anybody want—"

"—interrupt this program for breaking news!" trumpeted the TV. "According to satellite photos just released, a strange phenomenon is spreading over portions of deserts in Asia, South America, and . . . Preliminary reports say that a blinding white organic cover—"

"Aliens!" gasped Maddie, just as the newscast was overridden by the Compassion Channel logo.

"Hey, it's not time for that again," Ted said.

"Look at this," the voice-over urged, showing the same bright, white field as the newscast. "It's like seashells, made by tiny desert-living animals. But it reflects like ice. You can see that, can't you? It's reflecting heat back into space, so that the Earth's deserts won't advance any more. This white coating is saving Saya's life in Kenya.

"And Ahmed's in Morocco." Close-up.

"And Miguel's in Argentina.

"And Ekaterina's in Uzbekistan.

"And Ah Par's in Myanmar.

"And yours. Because with this reflecting shield to replace Earth's lost ice sheets, maybe—just maybe—we all will have a chance to avoid the disaster you saw earlier." Replay, eerie in its soundlessness, of the horror of a nuked Washington, D.C.

"Is this white cover a risk? In some ways, maybe, like all new technology. Is it an unauthorized risk we have to take? Yes. It breaks the rules, but desperate times call for radical action. We need to do this—for the children.

"Tell your leaders that."

The broadcast then repeated, word-for-word and image-for-image. As the third repetition began, Ron rose and abruptly clicked off the television.

Maddie shrugged. "So . . . not aliens. Sue me."

"I want to know more about this so-called 'white cover,'" Jim said. "Where the hell did it come from?"

"Well, at least somebody's doing something," Karen said.

"But without any proper authority! You heard them—nobody authorized this! It's against law and order!"

Ted said, "Who *could* authorize something like that?"

No one knew.

"Why?" Carmody said, softly. His first anger had passed, morphing into the pragmatism that had made his career what it was. This was happening; it would have to be dealt with. Hundreds of billions of dollars were at stake. StarCorps would need business strategies, scientists, spin masters, all of it, and need it fast. Carmody had urgent calls to make. But he delayed a few precious seconds, because he felt genuine curiosity. "Why, Glenn? This wasn't how you lived your life. Wasn't ever among your goals?"

"No." The old man was visibly weaker as the stimulants both wore off and took their toll.

"Then *why*?"

Sister Hélène-Marie started the long walk back to Nakmu, a few bits of the bright-white clutched in her fingers. She still didn't know what the bits were, or what they might be for. Undoubtedly government officials would, in the Lord's good time, tell her. She would listen—but only to a point. They knew much, these government officials. But on one critical matter they were wrong, very wrong. They thought that each man's destiny depended on what happened to the Earth.

When, in Jesus's truth, it was the other way around.

"Pirate broadcast signal has ceased again," the WRKC chief engineer said wearily. "Resume regularly scheduled programming."

Hah, thought the equally weary tech. The chief should know better. Nothing was regular about any of this. But maybe that was . . . a good thing? "Regular" hadn't been working well so far. Not even a little bit.

He could still see, in his mind's eye, the radiating white cover on the dead desert.

"Law and order," Jim repeated, nodding vigorously.

Brenda glanced at Ron, then gazed at the closed door of the baby's tiny bedroom. Ron knew what she was thinking, just as if she'd spoken aloud. Those other kids were on her mind, the kids with the weird foreign names. Ron was surprised to realize that he remembered them all: Saya. Ahmed. Ekaterina. Miguel. Ah Par.

Brenda said hesitantly, "Maybe you do have to have law and order. Yes. But . . . if those particles really can send a lot of heat back into space . . . really can save lives . . ." She stopped, embarrassed. Brenda didn't like to antagonize anybody. But her chin rose.

Ron had always trusted Brenda's instincts. Not an intellectual, his sweet wife, but *sound*. That was the word. Sound.

"Well," Ron said defiantly, looking from the blank TV to Jim. *Desperate times call for radical action.* "Well, *I* think it's a good idea, too. And I'm going to call my congressman in the morning."

Jim said, "Do you even know who he is?"

Ron didn't. But he would find out.

"Why, Glenn?" Carmody said.

Tartell was having trouble breathing. "Because . . . life isn't . . . same as . . . death. Different . . . rules."

"Sentimental claptrap."

Tartell smiled. "Wait . . . until you . . . get there."

Carmody didn't even bother to answer that one. He saw himself out, not stopping even when alarm bells started behind him and people again rushed into the room that he'd just left. Carmody vacated the dim house, cell phone already in hand, and strode rapidly toward the car, watching for the moment the phone picked up a tower.

But for just a second, as the too bright sunlight struck his face and the CO₂-clogged air hit his lungs, a shiver ran over him. His own death—what would be the "rules" for that? The goals? For just a moment it seemed that it already surrounded him, that inevitable moment that comes to everyone, anticipated or not. The ultimate desert.

He shrugged off the moment and started making business calls. ○



FUTURE TOAST

On the Silver Wedding Anniversary of William Price and Jana-6743

My friends told me I was crazy.
Mother went livid and raged long
into the night. Father shook his
head and cursed beneath his breath.
Our relatives balked in disbelief
and couldn't stop gossiping.

No one could get over the fact
that Jana was an insect.
Yet I knew she was the gal for me.



It's taken more than two decades
for the families to accept us,
to acclaim the success
of our union and celebrate
the shining achievements
of our hybrid offspring.

Now that I have gathered you here
for our Silver Wedding Anniversary,
beneath this virtual bower
of sparkling irises,
under the illumination
of a full winter moon,
I ask you in all sincerity
to raise your glasses
to the merging of our species.

Then the orchestra will play,
the crickets will rub their legs,
and we shall all dance as one.

—Bruce Boston

do(this)

Stephen Graham Jones

Stephen Graham Jones's most recent novel is *Demon Theory*. His next will be *Ledfeather*. Other books include *The Fast Red Road*, *The Bird Is Gone*, *All the Beautiful Sinners*, and *Bleed Into Me*. Over eighty of his short stories have been sold to publications that range from *Literal Latté* to *Cemetery Dance*. His new tale about more than one obsession is his first for *Asimov's*.

Leo's dad started talking about it over dinner, just thinking out loud like he did. It was something he'd heard at work. Leo stabbed his mashed potatoes with his fork and endured. He even made it a game: if he could get the next bite down before his dad interrupted himself again, that was a point, and when he had enough points then his plate would be clean and he could get back to his room for the night.

But then his dad, his thoughts were just stumbling all over themselves, each one branching off the middle of the last one, so that instead of a straight line of reasoning like Leo could have appreciated, it was just a jumbled snowball of conjecture. There was nothing elegant about it. More than that, it was precisely this kind of second grade, innocent exuberance that always embarrassed Leo about his dad. It was easier just to stay in his room.

As for Leo's mom, the few glances he cut her way, she was stabbing her potatoes as well. Or shaping them, maybe, making a kind of waterfall for the gravy cupped at the top of the volcano.

Had his dad noticed, taken the time to look from plate to plate, his verbal chalkboard session probably would have started him down a whole different track: inherited behaviors, convergent evolution, and on and on until the snowball rolled into some big avalanche that buried them all, only to be found next week, maybe, when work or school came knocking.

There was no chance of that, though.

Not the avalanche, but his dad noticing anything as mundane as his wife or son.

What he'd heard at work, at the Tank as he called it—he'd even bought a special tin lunch box, like thinking was supposed to be a real job—was a riddle of sorts. A simple enough question, if you dropped it in any normal cafeteria, but at the Tank they specialized in making the simple complicated, the potentially useful just wholly impractical.

The only reason Leo was even paying half-attention, really, was that it had a bit to do with his advanced study question for the month—Did language precede thought, or did thought precede language? The chicken/egg shuffle. And he'd been GT long enough to know that he wasn't really supposed to come up with a right answer. It was more about "honing his reasoning capabilities," "asking penetrating questions," "probing the world with his mind."

Like they thought he was in training to be his dad or something.

Yeah.

The guy who'd had the same bite of potatoes on his fork now for maybe four minutes, and wouldn't even notice they were cold when he finally put them in his mouth.

The riddle he was still thrilled with—for the moment, anyway—had to do with classification. Not genus and species and kingdom, nothing Latin or Linnaean, but more about distinguishing characteristics: if there were only one thing that could be said to separate the man-animal from all the "other" animals (his quotes), what might that be?

It was this kind of stuff that Leo's dad packed his lunch each morning for.

Leo huffed some accidental air out his nose. Instead of laughing.

His dad finally put his potatoes in his mouth. They may as well have been crushed ants. "And. . . ?" he said, motioning with his fork for Leo to take a stab.

Leo put another glob of potatoes in his mouth instead.

His dad nodded, already focusing all the way through Leo, and dropped into an explanation about how it wasn't anything biological, of course, that went without saying, and it couldn't be as easy as consciousness either, as that was, for now anyway, impossible to test for, and it couldn't really be language either, as prairie dogs had vocabulary, birds had syntax, primates could be taught to sign, and then there was chemical language, pheromones and all that, to say nothing of the flashing certain octopuses, *octopi*, engaged in to communicate—

Except . . . what if there were a way to test for consciousness *through* language, right?

Leo forked another bite in. His dad was rolling, out of control.

"Yeah, yeah . . . then it's just a matter of—of finding something peculiar to human communication that's not in any of the other language systems, not in whale song, not in beaver tails, not in bee dances . . . something—art. Writing. Poetry. Yes. Poetry is specifically human. Take poetry. We . . . we classify it as a leisure activity, supposing—supposing that the reason dolphins don't speak in verse is that verse has no practical use like extensions of their other forms of play might . . . spinning, jumping, it's all exercise, practice for hunting or a mating ritual or whatever, but poetry's just leisure—or, or, I mean, it could have to do with spare time too, right? I mean, they have a complex society but no civilization, no specialization that would really allow for the downtime necessary for leisure activities, for entertainment, for anything so idle, that's not directly related to survival. Like we're beyond that, I know, I know, not just redefining 'survival,' but that's not the real question. The real question is what's local only to poetry?"

It was another question for the gallery. For the prisoners.

"Let me compare thee to a summer day . . ." Leo's mom intoned, as if she couldn't help herself, and Leo winced, because one thing his dad didn't ever need in these kinds of conversations was somebody else packing their own clever handfuls of snow on.

But it was too late.

Leo looked up into his dad's blank eyes.

"Exactly!" he said, gravity there at the corner of his lip. "That's it. And what is poetry if not—if not stretching a functionally limited vocabulary, a limited set, to do things beyond its original parameters? This is . . . yes. Do you see what this is?"

Leo wasn't sure who the question was for. But his plate was clean.

"Metaphor," his dad whispered then, standing over the table as a form of emphasis, then whispering reverently. "Humans are the only animals we know of that use metaphor, that don't describe things as they are, but—it's because we're explorers, don't you see? Because we're adaptable to different environments. We always have pioneers looking over the next mountain, then coming back with tales of—whatever, dragons, castles, automobiles, moons—that have to be explained in terms the rest of the population doesn't . . . terms that don't *exist*, I mean. See? So you say this is like that, kind of. Yes. Instead of ever admitting something's indescribable, we push our words instead, rearrange them to—to compound and extend meaning. Do rabbits use metaphor to describe their carrots, you think?"

"In cartoons, you mean?" Leo said, his plate so ready to deliver to the sink.

"No," his dad said, confusion there in his eyes, "*real* ones, man."

Leo pursed his lips in what felt like pity, shook his head no, he didn't think real rabbits used metaphor that much in the wild, and then he was gone like always, ghosting through the kitchen to the stairs, the solace of his room.

"Carrots are carrots," he mumbled to himself, checking again to make sure his door was locked.

It was a true statement, one that he knew he could write a line of code for: `if($p = "orange") && if($p(!("basketball")))` then more than likely \$p would be a carrot. Provided he strung the conditionals out to account for every non-carrot orange thing. And there were probably classes he could use, even, if he wanted, a series of waterfalls to quit the function from cycling through each non-carrot: edible/non-edible, vegetable/mineral, terrestrial/Martian, "basketball-ish," etc., like a penny falling through a series of slots in a change sorter.

And it might even be fun that way.

Except right now he had to get his GT paper ready. It was the fourth one for the month, and, thankfully, the last of the "Language" cycle.

The first week had been hidden codes, semiotics and stuff, which, in spite of how inapplicable it seemed, had made Leo feel more rather than less vulnerable to advertisements, and then it had been finding instances of performative speech, like promises or when a preacher marries two people, stupid stuff that both described and did a thing at the same time, except Leo had gotten extra credit for writing a paper his dad would have been

proud of if he'd ever seen it. Its thesis was that programming, writing code, was the purest instance possible of so-called "performative" language. The words there weren't even called words, but "functions," but it still counted as language because there was vocabulary, there was syntax, there was communication, albeit between him and whatever system he was on.

But now there was this chicken/egg game.

Leo rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Beside the rig he was on now was his machine from last semester, before the rebuild. He still had it ported in just for data, but except for the drive it was scrap, just a skeleton. And maybe that would be a good enough answer for GT: not the chicken or the egg, but the chicken stripped down to its "eggness" somehow.

But that was what his dad was trying to do downstairs.

And Leo wasn't his dad.

He opened a terminal window, just to think.

All day, he'd been pretty sure his thesis was going to be that neither came first, really, that they had to have happened at the exact same time, language *was* thought, thought *was* language. Except now his dad had polluted him.

Now what he was wondering was if code, which he valued above all other language, mostly because it allowed him to talk to sane, reasonable servers and engines and modules instead of insane people like he'd just had to endure, what he wondered was if there was any metaphor in code? Any figurative language? Not necessarily whimsical or poetic or anything stupid like that, but something descriptive like his dad was saying, some nested bit of syntax that really pushed the language . . . some last-ditch workaround he'd had to come up with at one time or another which could, for the purposes of his paper at least, be called metaphor. And it would be something elegant, of course, one of those magic moments where he realized that this second statement, when recursing, and tricked into a false positive, could tweak the initial statement in such a way that the bracketing function could be made to do something halfway opposite from what it had been intended, a kind of halfway opposite that was also a shortcut. And not some pages-long line that you had to hold your breath to follow, either, but something simple, that Leo could prove a point with.

If he were going to prove a point, though—this was GT after all—he was going to have to have a data set to support it. At the very least he was going to have to establish that code was a language, not just a bunch of logical operators and plugged-in variables. That had been his only problem with the last paper: the proofs looked too much like math for everybody.

Even though it was GT, yeah.

But Leo had all night, too.

This time he was going to make his proof look, if not like it was natural language, which it practically already was if anybody would just take the time to read it, then at least recognizable to the uninitiated. Which was all different.

He was going to have to disguise all the functions, so that he could make sentences. *Human* sentences, but still machine readable.

It took him all of about four minutes to come up with a generator, too: all he had to do was write a simple little loop, dipping on one end from the dictionary, then on the other end from the function list. The only real twist—and he was proud of it, because it was elegant—was wrapping it to account for conjunctions, for two functions working in tandem in a way that didn't cancel each other out. What it meant, what it would spit out once he hit return and said *please* like he always did (but would never tell anybody about), was, at first, a simple row of variables that, when stated, would act for the functions. After that, though, and on into the night—he wasn't sure how far it would go, really, but had his processors shotgunned so wasn't worried either—what the loop would do was combine all three hundred-odd functions and delimiters in every way possible. Which, exponentially, yeah, this was going to be a large-size table, Leo guessed, a real Thanksgiving feast. But it wasn't like he was going to have to print it out or anything either, just index it and give a sample. At the last moment, he even added another line, a safety, just in case the recursion cycled all the way through the dictionary but still had some functions left to assign variables too. All it did was copy the initial loop and parse through the dictionary at random, hyphenating monosyllabic words to allow new variable names, the same way it was pairing the functions at the other end of the loop . . . or maybe even slopping them into an orgy, as some of the functions already were pairs, he guessed, Frankenstein conglomerations of function that buried a conditional within themselves.

Anyway.

"Please," Leo whispered, and hit return with his third finger, then held it down for exactly one second too long (luck), then ended up standing by his bedroom door minutes later, listening to his dad's ideas. He would have just let him in so he could sit down, but that never worked out, as his dad always just sat on the bed like nobody needed to sleep, and Leo would finally have to ask him what he was on anyway—were they smoking stuff at the Tank these days?

His dad, of course, would take it as bonding of some sort, as an invitation to stay.

So listening at the door was the safest course of action, really.

After a while Leo sagged down the wall, plugged in his headphones and half-slept until his dad angled the hand mirror under the door, caught him.

"I wasn't—" Leo started.

"—no problem," his dad finished, then started over, the potatoes probably still there on his lip for all the world to see.

Leo held his face in his hands and stared at the space under the door, his dad's watery shadow blotting out some of it.

"Just tell me what it's *like*, Dad," Leo finally said in one of the lulls that he'd once thought were dramatic instead of digestive pauses.

"What?" his dad said back.

"Tell me what it's like, I said."

"What what's like?"

"This other side of the mountain. This new place, this distinguishing characteristic."

"You want me to—?"

"If you're so human, I mean, yeah. Okay. If you're human, you can speak in metaphor, right?"

"Go on."

"Then describe speaking in metaphor for me. But use a metaphor to do it."

Silence. Blissful, perfect silence.

Sometimes you had to shoot the snowball with a flamethrower. Melt it down so that it would take him a while to get it cold and slushy enough to roll again.

Which was a simile, Leo was pretty sure. Or metonymy, synecdoche, who knew.

But he had to do something.

Two minutes later, finally, his dad's shadow drifted away from the space beneath the door.

Leo nodded to himself, told himself to stand and then did, felt his way to the desk.

The cycle was complete, it looked like, and hadn't snagged or thrown off any error messages.

All he had to do now was save the table to two places—his rule—post the new loop to the school's IP for class, then, in the morning maybe, or during phys ed, write whatever cornball paper he was going to write.

Already he was forgetting.

Do potatoes make you sleepy?

Leo wasn't sure, and didn't care.

He saved the table in one place, then a better place, then hit return after the loop just to keep the command line clean while he slept, like the blinking cursor was a night light or something.

Except he didn't get the blank line he wanted.

The loop *wasn't* perfect, wasn't over, was still spitting up terms, random at first, and jumbled like . . . how could there be misspellings if the words were being sucked from the dictionary? That was stupid.

Leo tapped the side of his monitor the way his mom used to tap him in church, when he needed to straighten up.

Like then, too, it worked.

The words were cleaner now. Not brighter, he already had the burn rate dialed back as far as it would go, but spelled right. Still all mixed together, though.

He hadn't even looked at the table.

Was it like this, trash?

Leo laughed through his nose, lowered his head to the sweet spot just in front of the keyboard, and closed his eyes, told himself not to fall asleep.

He woke some time later—hours, minutes, seconds—and the jumbled but properly spelled words had finally stopped. Unless he was just dreaming that the loop had corrected itself, of course. Not like that hadn't happened before.

And then it snapped, the problem: he'd forgotten to insist that the front end of the loop only cycle through the *terms* of the dictionary, the hyphenated terms it could make from two of them.

Instead, he'd left it open to account for the definitions as well.

Of course there'd be misspellings: phonetic pronunciations looked ugly, and some of the examples were archaic.

Which he would have caught right off if his dad hadn't hijacked him to the door.

Leo shook his head, stared down the hall to the worn spot in the carpet he imagined his dad to be, his "Well," then hit return again, harder than he usually let himself anymore.

Instead of returning junk this time like he expected, though, it spat back just a random line, probably one of the dictionary examples, the "use this word in a sentence" junk: *she is a flower*.

Leo smiled a tolerant smile, hit return again, with his lucky third finger, just to see what he'd get next, but it was the same thing: *she is a flower*.

He rubbed his third finger in the fist of his other hand, and said it aloud, like an insult that had been thrown at him: "She?"

It wasn't impossible that the loop would cycle through to the same place twice in a row. Unlikely, but not impossible.

Three times, though?

Leo hit the return key again, this time with the eraser end of a pencil he never used.

she is a flower

"You'd love this, wouldn't you?" he said to the idea of his dad, then shook his head, blew some more air out his nose—what time was it anyway?—and hit return over and over with his index finger.

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

she is a flower

"Who?" he said to it, standing now, staring at the monitor.

No answer.

"What I thought," Leo said, laughing at himself some. It was four in the morning; he could see now. It was a funny thing. A stupid, stupid, funny thing.

He fell back into his chair again, his legs sprawled out under the desk, and said he was sorry to the computer—this was why he locked his door, because his mom didn't like him talking to his machines, which he translated into the infinitely more usable didn't like to *catch* him talking to his machines—and, just because he had to have that empty command line to sleep to, even for two hours, he hit return again. Then leaned forward.

She wasn't like a flower anymore.

"Do . . . what?" Leo said.

At the line, just a home-made function: *do(this)*. Except "this" wasn't even defined, it was just assumed, like a global variable or post data or something.

He hit return again and got the arrow back, the steady blinking cursor of peace.

Evidently his loop had cycled some of the dictionary in with the delimiters—mixed the syntax and the vocabulary in a way he hadn't outlawed. Which meant the walls of the loop were porous. It was broke in just all kinds of ways.

But screw it.

It was four in the morning. Four ten. God.

Though it wasn't a Tuesday, and he hadn't even been planning to, still, just to be safe he powered down, in case the loop kickstarted itself in the night or something equally stupid and stuffed his RAM with a string of those huge tables.

And then it was done. Leo was back where he started. Except he had some potatoes in him, he guessed.

Another stupid night.

He shut his light off at the socket, rolled into bed, fixing his knee against the wall the way it had to be, and listened to his processor cycle back up after the sixteen seconds of black he'd specified, reaching out to meet and greet the old rig like it always had to, like it was just a whole new drive, a whole new day.

Like . . . like—

Leo opened his eyes, stared hard at nothing.

do(this)

Where *this* had been undefined. Assumed. Not a global variable or post data, but . . . a *pronoun*?

And what had he just been thinking?

Yeah.

The stupid cable. The idiotic cable he'd had to patch between his new rig and the old one.

It plugged *into* the old rig. A male connection for a female slot.

she.

She is a flower.

Leo was breathing hard now, like his dad.

She is a flower. Where this—where this . . . where you had to use it like a word that was in place of a variable, like a word for a thing that already had an antecedent, in whatever conversation had already been going on!

this was the broken loop he'd written, the obvious obvious freaking *loop*, the conversation he'd been having with his computer.

She is a flower, the old rig is the flower, the girl, the new one the—and the male, the *new* machine, wanting her to . . . to—

To learn to speak too.

Leo sat up in his bed and peeked across the room.

The cursor was there, blinking steady, the loop wholly forgotten, the table saved in two remote places.

Do this, it had said. Asked.

Because it was alone.

Leo covered his mouth with his hand, and didn't really mean to cry but it was dark anyway, and his door was locked, and the computer that was watching him now, it was just a computer. ○

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Two-time Hugo award winning author, Allen M. Steele, returns to Coyote for the second part of his riveting new novel . . .

GALAXY BLUES

PART TWO OF FOUR

THE PRIDE OF CUCAMONGA

Allen M. Steele

Synopsis of Part One:

My name is Jules Truffaut, and this is the story of how I redeemed the human race.

It all began when I stowed away aboard the starship Robert E. Lee for its monthly voyage to Coyote, humankind's first interstellar colony. Technically speaking, I was a first-class passenger, having already booked passage to 47 Ursae Majoris. However, as a former ensign in the Union Astronautica of the Western Hemisphere Union—whose relationship with Coyote is strained at best—it was necessary for me to sneak aboard the ship just before it departed from Earth.

My plan was to travel to Coyote under an assumed identity; once there, I would plead for political asylum. But my scheme backfired when a steward who'd found me became suspicious. Checking the manifest, she discovered that, although I had indeed purchased a ticket, there was no record of me actually boarding the ship. So shortly after the Lee jumped through Earth's starbridge to 47 Ursae Majoris, the chief petty officer placed me under arrest.

On the bridge, I met the Lee's commanding officer, Anastasia Tereshkova. Realizing that I was in serious trouble, I revealed my true identity and informed her that I was seeking amnesty. However, I'd overlooked the fact that one has to actually set foot on foreign soil in order to defect. Since the Lee was still in space, Tereshkova was obliged to take me back to Earth and turn me over to the authorities.

So I took matters into my own hands. On my way to the brig, I escaped from my captors and stole one of the ship's lifeboats. I was trained as a pilot, so I was able to guide the craft to a safe touchdown on Coyote. However, almost as soon as I landed, I was apprehended by the colonial militia.

The soldiers brought me to Liberty, Coyote's largest colony, where I was thrown in jail. I had little doubt that the local magistrates would order my deportation. Before that happened, though, I had two visitors. The first was a mysterious figure who appeared at my cell window. As he stared at me, a door opened in my mind, releasing all my memories. I fell unconscious; when I awoke, the stranger had disappeared.

The second was Morgan Goldstein, the billionaire founder of Janus, Ltd., an interstellar shipping company. Impressed by the way I'd escaped from the Lee, he offered a way out of my predicament. Goldstein was recruiting a crew for an expedition to Rho Coronae Borealis, with the intent of opening trade with its inhabitants, the alien hjadd. If I signed on as shuttle pilot, he would make sure that I wasn't deported. Having little choice, I agreed to work for him.

After arranging for my release, Goldstein took me to a tavern where I met the rest of the crew: the captain, Ted Harker, and his wife and first officer, Emily Collins, both of whom were on the first ship to contact the hjadd; the helmsman, Ali Youssef; and the cargo master, a lovely young woman by the name of Rain Thompson, who was oddly cold toward me. And finally, another passenger besides Goldstein himself: Gordon Ash, whom I recognized as the stranger who'd visited me in jail.

This was going to be a weird trip, indeed.

SIX

Downtime . . . the night life on Coyote . . . the mysterious tenant . . . a tense breakfast during which various matters are discussed.

I

We hung around Liberty for another week, local time, more out of necessity than anything else. Our ship had recently undergone refit at Janus's shipyard in Earth orbit, and we were told that it wouldn't be delivered to Coyote until the chief engineer was satisfied that all the new work was up to spec. So we had little to do until then but wait for our ride to arrive.

Before I left Lew's Cantina, Ted handed me a data fiche for a Zeus-class shuttle. It was a different sort of boat than the ones I'd been trained to fly—a single-stage-to-orbit heavy lifter—but I had little doubt that I could handle it. The next day, I wandered around town until I found the comp store I'd spotted while Morgan was driving me to the inn, and used a good chunk of the money I'd brought with me to buy a new pad, complete with hologram heads-up. Once I loaded the fiche, I was able to pull up a 3D simulation of the flight controls, which I used to familiarize myself with what I'd find once I climbed into the cockpit.

I used most of the remaining cash to buy other stuff. Goldstein had given me new clothes, sure, but he hadn't anticipated everything that a well-

dressed spacer might need. It took a while, but I finally managed to locate a shop that catered to pros like myself. I picked up a pair of stick-shoes for zero-g work, a pilot's watch—electronic analog, with three programmable time zones, a radiation counter, and a bevel—and a pair of sunglasses, along with a utility vest and a miniature tool kit to go with it. The sort of stuff I'd carried when I belonged to the Union Astronautica, but which I'd been forced to give back when I was kicked out of the service.

So I shopped, and I studied, and otherwise looked for ways to kill time until my ship came in. That turned out to be harder than I'd expected. Liberty was the largest colony on Coyote, but that didn't exactly make it a hoppin' party town. Most people there possessed a puritanical work ethic—get up in the morning, have breakfast, go off to work, come home in the evening, have dinner, go to bed—they had inherited from the original settlers. Once the sun went down, the streets were just about dead. Oh, there was a theatre ensemble—one evening I caught a performance of a play written by a local author, a comedy packed with topical references that might have been side-splitting if I'd known what they were about—and I eventually found a bar on the other side of town that had a half-decent folk trio, if you like music played so slow and soft that you could fall asleep between songs. But even then, everything closed down long before midnight, leaving me to walk home as Bear ascended into the night sky, its silver rings illuminating deserted sidewalks and houses where the lights were going out one by one.

A couple of other things gave me interest. One was baseball. Late in the afternoon, once I got through my daily routine of memorizing the layout of the shuttle cockpit and practicing the tutorials, I would mosey over to the Colonial University and watch the Boids practice. For a bunch of kids who'd never set foot on Doubleday Field, they weren't bad. Not great, by any means, but they had their hearts in the right place. I sat in the right-field bleachers and watched the team while they divided into two squads and played off against each other. At first, I winced while these boys and girls committed errors that would have put a Little League team to shame, until I gradually realized that these were third-generation colonists who'd inherited the game from their fathers and grandfathers. Once I came to accept this, I stopped cursing the pitcher every time he walked a batter. Even so, I found myself wishing I could be out there, if only to show these guys how baseball was really played.

My other distraction was Rain.

Most of the crew had places to live besides the inn. Goldstein flew back to Albion, where I was told he had an estate just outside New Brighton. Ted and Emily had a house in town, and Ali lived in an apartment above a cheesemaker's shop; I'd run into them from time to time, usually while I was out doing errands. Ash had a room at the inn, too, just down the hall from mine, but I rarely saw him, and then only late at night, when he'd lurch back to the Soldier's Joy from Lew's Cantina. He never spoke to me, and from what I could tell, he seemed to be perpetually drunk. On occasion I'd hear the sounds of a guitar being played in his room, but that was about it. Altogether, everything about him was ominous—there's nothing worse than having a jughead aboard ship—but since he was Morgan's passenger, there was little I could do about it.

Rain had been put up at the inn as well, something I didn't know until

the morning of my third day there, when I spotted her in the dining room. She'd arrived before I did, though, and it was clear that she wasn't thrilled to see me. Before I could go over to ask if I could join her for breakfast, she hastily stood up, dropped a few colonials on the table, and scurried out the garden door. When the innkeeper's wife came by to take my order, I asked if the young lady who was just here was another guest. She told me, yes, she was indeed . . . and pointedly added that her room was on the ground floor, just across the hall from the apartment where she and her husband lived. Just in case, I suppose, that I might be a little *too* interested.

Which I wasn't. The last thing I wanted to do was waste my time pursuing a girl who acted as if I had spinach stuck between my teeth. Yet Rain Thompson wasn't just another girl. She was also a shipmate, which meant that we'd have to work together for the duration of our voyage. It wouldn't do either of us any good if she refused to talk to me. One way or another, I'd have to make peace with her.

That turned out to be difficult. Over the course of the next few days, I'd see her every so often, but always from a distance . . . a distance that she seemed determined to keep between us. Several times while walking through town, I saw her coming the other way, but when I quickened my pace to catch up with her, she'd either cross the street to avoid me or duck down an alley and disappear. Once, while watching the Boids work out, I caught a glimpse of her strolling across the university campus, but she'd vanished by the time I came down from the bleachers. On another occasion, I spotted her through a shop window . . . but that time I held back, not wanting her to feel like she was being cornered.

Yet even as she and I played this little cat and mouse game, I found myself becoming intrigued by her. I'd seen plenty of women who were more beautiful—and to be honest, I'd even slept with a few of them—but there was something about her that fascinated me. I liked the way she moved, the way she dressed, the way she let her hair fall around her shoulders. The only thing I couldn't stand was the coldness in her eyes whenever she looked my way . . . but even then, that was just one more part of the mystery that was Rain Thompson.

On my eighth day in Liberty, I resolved to solve this enigma once and for all. She got up early in the morning. Well, so would I. That night, I set my watch alarm for five AM, laid out my clothes so that I could get dressed as quickly as possible, and went to bed early. By sunrise, I was seated in the ground floor parlor, casually reading yesterday's edition of the *Liberty Post*, when I heard a door open and shut just down the hall.

Keeping the newspaper in front of my face, I waited until I heard her walk into the parlor. The dining room wasn't open yet, though, and her footsteps stopped by the door. She hesitated, turned around . . . and that was when I lowered the newspaper.

"Good morning," I said.

Rain's eyes went wide, and for a second I thought she'd leap a foot into the air. "Oh my god!" she snapped. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to surprise you." Sure, I did, but there was no point in letting her know that. "Coming in for breakfast? So am I."

"Well, I . . . I . . ."

"Nothing else open at this hour, so far as I know. Unless you'd like to take a walk."

Her eyes darted toward the front door. "As a matter of fact, I . . ."

"Good. I'll go with you." I put aside the paper and stood up. "A little constitutional first thing in the morning is good for the heart, don't you think?" She was still trying to figure out how to answer this when the dining room door clicked from the inside, and the innkeeper's wife pushed it open. "Or maybe some breakfast first," I added. "Shouldn't exercise on an empty stomach, you know."

Rain looked first at the dining room, then at the front door, and finally at me. Unless she wanted to flee back to her room, she was trapped, and she knew it. "Well . . . all right," she said, her expression lapsing into sour resignation. "If you insist."

"Breakfast? Or a walk first?" She shrugged, as if the choice mattered little to her. "Breakfast, then." I raised two fingers to the landlady. "Table for two, please . . . and yes, we'd like coffee."

II

Rain wore a calf-length hemp skirt and a thin wool sweater. When I pulled back the chair for her, I noticed the silver ankle bracelet above her left foot, and the turquoise pin with which she'd pulled back her hair that morning. As always, she wore her clothes with elegant simplicity. I'd known women on Earth who spent hours primping before a mirror to achieve the look she managed to capture with casual ease.

She let me seat her, but said nothing while we glanced at our menus. The Soldier's Joy offered the same breakfast every morning, so the choice wasn't difficult to make: I took two scrambled eggs, a rasher of bacon, toast, and a glass of tomato juice, while she ordered a poached egg, toast, and water. A pot of black coffee was already on the table; once the landlady disappeared into the kitchen, I picked it up and poured a cup for myself.

"You were waiting for me, weren't you?" she asked.

My first thought was to pretend that this was nothing but a coincidence, but she was too sharp for that kind of nonsense. "Uh-huh," I said. "Got up early, waited until you showed up." A yawn rose from my chest as I put down the coffee pot, and I raised my hand to my face. "Pardon . . . little early for me."

"Why?"

"Well . . ." I picked up my cup, took a sip. "First off, you and me are going to have to work together, and my experience has been that it's best to make friends with your shipmates . . . or at least get to know them a little better." The coffee was strong that morning; I added a splash of goat's milk to tone it down. "Second, I'm wondering why you keep trying to avoid me, when . . . so far as I know, at least . . . I've done nothing to offend you."

"Is that a fact?" She sat back in her chair, arms folded across her chest.

"That's a fact." I took another sip. "Your turn."

She regarded me for a few moments, as if sizing me up. "Very well, then," she said at last. "The fact of the matter is that I don't trust you."

Of all the things she could have said, that was the one that I least expected. At least she could have waited until I didn't have a drink in my hand. Hot coffee sloshed over the rim of the cup and scalded the web of my thumb, causing me to wince. "Damn," I muttered, hastily putting down the cup and picking up a napkin. "Don't mince words, do you?"

An offhanded shrug. "You asked."

"So what makes you think I can't be. . . ?" A thought occurred to me. "Oh, right. You mean the way I got here. Look, it's a long story, but if you'll let me explain . . ."

"Don't bother. I know all about that already." Rain poured coffee for herself; she took it black, ignoring both the milk and sugar on the table. "The fact that you're a stowaway only confirms my suspicions . . . although, I have to admit, the way you pulled it off was pretty clever."

"Right up until I got caught, sure." She said nothing as I folded a corner of the napkin, dipped it into the water glass, and used it to nurse my burned hand. "But why do you say that confirms your suspicions of me?"

Rain absently toyed with a fork, running a finger along its handle. "When Morgan became interested in you, he got someone who works for him to check you out. . . ."

"He told me he did this. I assume one of his people managed to access my service record."

"Morgan has his resources." She picked up her coffee. "There's more to you than meets the eye."

I had to smile at this. "How kind of you to say so."

She wasn't amused. "Your brother Jim probably thought so, too. Right after you betrayed him."

Suddenly, this conversation was no longer as charming as it might have been. I stared at her from across the table, trying to decide how much of a gentleman I wanted to be. "That's—" I took a deep breath—"none of your business."

"It isn't?" Rain stared back at me. "You said it yourself . . . people should get to know one another if they're going to work together on a ship." She shook her head. "And what I found out about what you did to your brother . . ."

"You don't know squat about. . . !"

The landlady chose that moment to come through the kitchen door with our plates in each hand. She must have noticed the tension between us, because she hesitated for a moment before she approached our table and, without a word, put the plates in front of us. Neither Rain nor I spoke until she vanished once more. I'd lost my appetite by then, but at least the interruption gave me a moment to get my temper back under control.

"Did it ever occur to you," I said, trying hard to remain calm, "that what's in my files may not be the truth? Or at least not all of it?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Rain picked up her fork, used it to pierce the yolk of her poached egg. "There's no reason for anyone to lie."

"Oh, yes, there is. Especially when it has to do with the *Academia del Espacio*." I let out my breath. "Look, let me tell you about what happened to Jim. . . ."

III

Jim Truffaut is my younger brother. My mother and my father had already decided that they wanted to have two sons, so genengineering assured them that I didn't have a sister instead. Since our folks were also fans of classic cinema, they decided to take advantage of our family name to christen us after one of their favorite French films. You can look it up if you don't catch the allusion; reference TRUFFAUT, FRANÇOIS, DIRECTOR, and go from there.

Skip forward eighteen years. Since my lifelong dream had been to be-

come a spacer, once I graduated from high school, I applied to the Union Astronautica. In the Western Hemisphere Union, this was the only way to get into space. My grades were good, and with my father's assistance—which included a nice bribe to the local Matriarch for whom he'd done a few favors as a loyal Party member—I was accepted into the *Academia del Espacio*, the UA's training school for its astronaut corps.

Jim didn't necessarily want to go to the stars, but neither did he want to live in Kansas for the rest of his life. The same Matriarch wrote a recommendation for him, and Jim entered the Academy as a plebe just as I was entering my senior year. But while I sailed through the program without much of a hitch, Jim had problems from the moment he set foot in the Academy. And let's face it: although social collectivism dictates that all men are created equal, the fact of the matter is that some of us are more equal than others. I had spacedust in my blood, but Jim had to struggle every waking moment just to get through his classes.

I tried to help him as much as I could, and as an upperclassman I was able to do so. But the day finally came when I graduated from the Academy, with the subsequent rank of Ensign First Class, and I had to leave my brother behind. Jim's poor grades had already caused him to fall back a semester; he'd been put on probation and was in danger of washing out by the time I was assigned to a Mars cycleship. My future was bright, but his lay in shadow.

I'd promised him, though, that I'd try to help him as much as I could, and see that he'd get posted on my ship once he graduated. Jules and Jim, off to conquer the universe. That was a promise I'd live to regret, because I'd just finished my first tour on the *Victory* when I received a coded communiqué from Jim. His finals were coming up in two weeks, and he was having problems remembering vital equations he needed to know in order to pass. Could I help him in any way? Hint, hint.

I knew the written part of the exams like the back of my hand. I'd also learned, from idle small talk with fellow junior officers aboard the *Victory*, that the questions hadn't changed in at least five or six years. So, using a bypass that would circumvent Academy mail filters, I sneaked those questions to Jim, along with the appropriate answers.

Sure, I was helping Jim cheat. And I didn't feel much guilt about doing it, either. All that stuff I'd been forced to memorize was already loaded into every pad and comp I'd used aboard ship; the Academy only wanted its cadets to know them in the unlikely event of a system crash. So sliding him the answers to a redundant part of a written exam . . . where was the harm, in the most practical sense?

The harm was that it *was* cheating, plain and simple. The instructors who examined Jim's test didn't notice any discrepancies; however, as a matter of routine, the test was fed to a comp, which matched its answers against those given by other cadets in previous years. The comp immediately saw that two questions I'd gotten wrong during my finals were identical to those Jim failed to answer correctly during his. Given our relationship, this caused a red flag to be raised. And when the board of inquiry came to me . . .

My eggs had gone cold by then, my bacon as brittle as a lie. The only thing on my plate that was still worth eating was the toast; I daubed some jelly on it only because it gave my hands something to do.

"I didn't have a choice," I said, reluctant to look Rain straight in the eye. "Even being suspected of cheating on an exam is enough to sink a cadet."

"And so you sold out your own brother." Her gaze was remorseless. "To save your career."

"That what you were told?" I looked up at her. "That I finked on him?"

"Yes. And . . ."

"Get it straight . . . *I denied everything!*"

She blinked. "But I thought . . ."

"Forget what you've heard. Do you honestly believe that I'd burn my own brother just to save my skin?" Before she could answer, I went on. "When I was called before the board, I stood before six Patriarchs and Matriarchs and told them that I'd never passed any information to Jim."

"Then how did they find out?"

"Because Jim had already confessed. He was so scared, he told his advisor about what he'd done even before the board called him up. But they kept us from seeing each other, and so when I walked into the room, all I knew was that my brother was under suspicion." I sighed, shook my head. "I figured that, if both of us denied everything, all they'd have was statistical probability, and that wouldn't be enough to prove anything. What I didn't count on was Jim fessing up."

"So you lied to save your brother."

"Uh-huh . . . and my own ass, to tell the truth." I picked up my coffee. It had gone lukewarm by then, but I slugged it down anyway. "Didn't work. With Jim's confession on record, they had both of us nailed. So they expelled him from the Academy and tossed me out of the service."

"The Union Astronautica would do that?" She stared at me. "Kick out one of its own just because. . . ?"

"Yes, it would." She clearly didn't understand. "Look," I went on, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the table, "in a system like the one I grew up in, the rights of the individual matter less than the rights of society. Not much grey area in between. You're either right or wrong, with us or against us." I raised a fist in a mock Union salute. "All hail the glory of social collectivism, and all that happy crap."

"I can't believe that," she murmured, her gaze falling to her plate. I noticed that she hadn't touched her food either.

"Well . . . sorry, but there it is. I've told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Even though my breakfast had gone cold, I wasn't about to let it go to waste. I picked up a piece of bacon and nibbled on it. "You can believe me, or you can believe a UA file you've managed to hack. Doesn't matter either way. Morgan hired me, and that's what counts."

Something I said rekindled her anger, because her eyes flared when she looked up at me again. "All that tells me is that you can't be counted on. Maybe you tried to save your brother, but you lied to people who trusted you not to do so. . . ."

"Aw, c'mon. . . !"

"And then you went further. You faked your identity . . . twice, if I understand it right . . . in order to stow away aboard a Coyote starship, when you could have simply purchased a ticket . . ."

"I did buy a ticket. Under another name, sure . . . but I wasn't a free-loader." She looked confused, and I went on. "When I was thrown out of the service, the government revoked my passport. The last thing they

wanted was to have a former UA officer leave the country and take their secrets with him . . . that had happened before, until they clamped down on it. That's why I had to sneak aboard the *Lee* . . . there was too much of a chance of having red flags go up if I'd tried to ship out any other way."

"Uh-huh." She remained skeptical. "And when you got caught, you hijacked a lifeboat and . . ."

"Oh, for the love of . . ." Angry again, I tossed the rest of the bacon on the plate. "What kind of dream world do you live in? I'd hit rock bottom. At least Jim was able to return to Salina and get his life back . . . he hadn't really wanted to go into space, so all he lost was a job he hadn't been cut out for in the first place."

"Sounds like you've got a bone to pick with him."

"We're not on speaking terms anymore, if that's what you're asking." I didn't add that Jim had never bothered to apologize for ratting me out to the board, or that he'd told our folks that it had been my idea to pass the test answers to him. "After what happened, I had nothing left. I couldn't get hired by anyone else because, in the WHU, there *is* nothing else. You want to be a spacer, you join the UA. Or . . . well, that's it. Nothing else. Unless you decide to play dirty."

"Play dirty?"

"Sure. You scrounge up what little cash you have, buy a phony I.D. and passport on the black market, and leave the continent on whatever sub-orbital freighter you can find. Then you land somewhere in Europe, hitch-hike your way across another continent until you reach a spaceport where you can bribe your way aboard a ship bound for Highgate. Then . . ."

This was quickly turning into a rant. I pulled myself up short. "Anyway, please don't tell me about the virtues of a clean and honest life unless you've lost everything you once had, or had a brother who's a worthless piece of . . ."

"Don't you talk about my brother!"

That came as an angry shout, one that would have silenced the entire room if anyone else had been there. Rain's face had gone red; now it was her turn to be pissed off. Past her shoulder, I caught a glimpse of the kitchen door easing open a crack as the landlady peered out at us. I looked back at her and shook my head ever so slightly; satisfied that the guests weren't about to start throwing furniture at each other, she eased the door shut once more.

"My apologies," I said, keeping my voice as low as possible. "Didn't mean to offend you."

Realizing that I hadn't meant any harm, she closed her eyes as she sought to regain control of her emotions. "Sorry," she whispered. "I don't know what . . . I mean, you couldn't know about . . ." A deep sigh, then she straightened her shoulders. "Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot there."

"I think so, yeah." Finding nothing else to say, I looked around the table. "More coffee?" I asked, picking up the pot. "It might still be . . ."

"No . . . none for me, thanks." Rain's hands trembled as they found the napkin in her lap, brought it to her face. I was surprised to see that the corners of her eyes had become moist. "I just . . . sorry, but something you said . . ."

"I . . ."

"Forget it." She snuffled back tears. "Didn't mean to bark at you like that. I just . . ."

Whatever she intended to say to me, I didn't get a chance to hear it, for at that moment the dining room door opened, and I looked around to see Ted come in. The captain spotted Rain and me, and quickly walked over to our table.

"Good. You're both up." He glanced at our plates. "Sorry to interrupt. Just started?"

"Yeah, but . . ." I glanced at Rain; to my relief, she'd dried her tears and put away the napkin. "I don't think either of us is very hungry. Why, what's going on?"

"Just got a call from Morgan." Ted pulled back an empty chair, sat down. "Our ship's here. Came through the starbridge about an hour ago, and it'll be in orbit later today. We're to pack up and grab the noon gyrobus to New Brighton."

"We're shipping out? Just like that?"

"Just like that." Ted picked up a piece of toast from my plate and munched on it. "Hope you're ready to pilot that shuttle, because you're about to get your chance."

"Yeah, sure." After all the hours I'd put in on the tutorials, I could fly it blindfolded if I had to. "But what's the rush? I mean, don't we have to load the cargo and . . .?"

"Cargo's already at the spaceport, ready to go aboard the shuttle once it lands." Ted looked over at Rain. "Ready for this, sweetie?"

"No problem here, skipper." I was amazed by how quickly she'd recovered. No clue on her face that, only a few minutes ago, she'd been on the verge of tears. Or, just before that, ready to belt me across the room. "Just get me to New Brighton. I'll handle the rest."

"That's my girl." Ted gave her a fond smile, then checked his watch. "Gyro leaves in a few hours. Go upstairs and pack your gear. I'll check you out of your rooms and call a cab." He looked around. "Anyone seen Ash this morning?"

I was about to say that I never saw him before sundown when Rain supplied the answer for me. "Still in his room, I think." She hesitated, then quietly added, "I doubt he's in much condition to fly."

Oh, so she'd also noticed the inebriated state in which our mystery passenger constantly resided. Yet there was something in the way she and Ted looked at each other that gave me reason to think that they knew more about Ash than anyone had divulged to me. "I'll wake him up," Ted said, standing up again. "He's coming with us, whether he wants to or not."

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a couple of colonials and put them on the table. If no one wanted to tell me about Ash, I'd just have to live with it. Yet there was something else I deserved to know.

"Pardon me, Captain," I said as I pushed back my chair, "but just one little thing. . . ."

"Yes?"

"The name of our ship . . . what is it?"

Ted didn't reply at once. Then he pulled back his shoulders, hitched his thumbs within his belt, and looked me straight in the eye.

"Mr. Truffaut," he said, "the name of our ship is the *Pride of Cucamonga*."

I almost laughed out loud. "What kind of a name is that for a . . . ?"

"We're getting whatever Mr. Goldstein has decided to give us." He shrugged. "Our job is to fly it."

SEVEN

Shipping out . . . Loose Lucy and her motley crew . . . caution: weird load . . . and an even weirder passenger to go with it . . . shake, rattle, and roll.

IV

The New Brighton spaceport was more sophisticated than I expected. I'm not sure what I'd anticipated—an overgrown meadow, perhaps, with goats grazing among rusted-out fuel tanks and some old codger sitting on the front porch of a log cabin ("A-yuh, we have spaceships landing here now and then")—but what I found instead were several square miles of steel-reinforced concrete, with service vehicles moving among gantries that looked as if they'd been built yesterday. At one end of the field was a sleek new passenger terminal; next to it rose the slender pylon of a control tower, its roof bristling with antenna and sat dishes. Even Port Olympus on Mars didn't look so good.

The gyrobus touched down on the commercial side of the spaceport, not far from a row of hangars where several shuttles were parked. Everyone aboard the afternoon flight from Liberty was a pro spacer, with most of them working for the Federation Navy; before we'd boarded the gyro, Ted had quietly told us to say nothing to them, and refrain from talking about our mission. So we kept to ourselves, drawing curious glances from the Federation guys but little more. We waited until they disembarked before we picked up our bags and filed out of the aircraft, walking down the steps into the warmth of the equatorial sun.

We'd been told that someone would be there to meet us, but apparently they hadn't gotten the message. While Ted got on the phone to make a hurry-up call, I took a good look at the people whom I'd be flying with. No wonder the Feds had given us the fish-eye; none of us looked as if we'd ever set foot aboard a spacecraft, let alone served as its flight crew. No one wore uniforms of any sort. Rain had changed out of her skirt into a long-sleeved tunic and a pair of drawstring trousers, while Ted wore an old *Galileo* ball cap; Ali carried a rolled-up prayer mat under his arm, and Emily had brought along a knitting bag. Ash was obviously hungover; sitting on his duffel bag, his shoulders slumped forward and the hood of his dark brown robe pulled up over his head, he stared at the ground as if he was about to throw up at any minute. I noticed a battered guitar case among his belongings, and wondered if he had a bottle of booze stashed in there.

After awhile, an open-air hovercart showed up, driven by a kid barely old enough to shave. With mumbled apologies for being late, he helped us load our belongings into the rear, then climbed behind the wheel. The cart took a

one-eighty turn and purred off across the field, the driver dodging cargo loaders and fuel trucks as we passed the hangars. From the other side of the spaceport, there was a roar as a passenger shuttle lifted off, no doubt headed for orbital rendezvous with the *Robert E. Lee*. We'd just heard the loud boom of it going supersonic when I caught my first look at my new craft.

The CFS *Loose Lucy* was eighty feet tall from the pads of its landing gear to the blunt cone of its nose faring, forty feet abeam where the nozzle of its nuclear engine protruded from the oblate plate of its stern. Judging from the dents, scratches, and scorch marks along the sides of its bell-shaped hull, it was apparent that *Lucy* had more than a few flight-hours on her. Not a very promising sign.

I glanced at Ted and Emily, saw the dubious expressions on their faces. Ted looked back at me and shrugged. "No one promised us a new boat," he said quietly, trying to make the best of it. "And I've been told it's flight-worthy. Think you'll have any trouble?"

"Sure . . . if it doesn't fall apart during takeoff." Behind me, Ali was whispering something in Arabic that sounded vaguely like a prayer.

A gantry tower had been rolled up beside the shuttle, with a gangway leading to the passenger hatch at the top of the craft. *Lucy's* mid-deck cargo hatch was open; the shuttle's freight elevator had been extended upon its T-bar crane, its cage lowered to the ground. A cargo loader was parked next to the craft, and as the cart coasted to a halt, a familiar figure detached himself from a group of pad rats and walked over to greet us.

"Glad to see you made it," Goldstein said, as if we had any choice in the matter. "Sorry this was on such short notice, but I didn't know exactly when the ship was supposed to arrive until early this morning."

"Not a problem, boss." Ted shook his hand, then stepped back to gaze up at the shuttle. "It . . . well, looks like it's been quite well broken-in."

"And put back together again," I muttered.

Emily scowled at me, and Ted chose to ignore my comment, but Morgan's expression darkened. "Sorry, Mr. Truffaut," he said, cupping an ear. "I didn't quite hear that."

"I said, she looks solidly put together, sir." *For something that looks like it came straight from the salvage yard*, I silently added.

"Don't let looks fool you. She's had long and dependable service. I went for nothing but the best." The rest of us looked askance at one another, but no one said anything as Goldstein continued. "We've almost finished loading the cargo. Rain, you may want to take a look at the manifest, make sure that everything is . . ."

"Pardon me," I said, "but would someone finally tell me what we're going to be hauling?" I was looking at the cargo loader. Stacked on its flatbed were enormous rolls, tightly wrapped in white nylon and lashed together with coils of rope. They somewhat resembled the bales of winter hay one might see in a cow pasture back on Earth, but I couldn't imagine hay being exported to Rho Coronae Borealis.

"Hemp," Morgan replied.

"Hemp?" I raised an eyebrow. "You can't be . . ."

"Well, not exactly." He hesitated. "Female *cannabis sativa*, dried and cured, to be more precise . . ."

"Marijuana," Rain said.

I stared at her. "You've got to be kidding."

She calmly looked back at me. "No, I'm not kidding. Five thousand pounds of marijuana, from hemp plantations just south of Shuttlefield."

"What the . . . ?" I was having a hard time keeping my jaw from hitting the ground. "What the hell does the *hjadd* want with two and half tons of marijuana?"

Ted let out his breath. "It's a long story, but . . . to make it short, when the *hjadd* rescued Emily and me from Spindrift, one of the things they found aboard our shuttle were a few grams of marijuana our companion happened to be carrying for his own consumption. The *hjadd* discovered that it was an edible herb they could use in their own food."

"They *eat* marijuana?"

"Think of it as tea, or perhaps chocolate." Goldstein smiled as he led the way over to the loader. Its operator was using the crane to lift one of the bales from the flatbed and place it on the freight elevator. "The *hjadd* are vegetarian by nature, so they consider it to be a rare delicacy. Fortunately, the sample Dr. Ramirez had with him was the seedless variety, so they've been unable to cultivate it on their own world. Therefore, if they want more, they need to come to us."

He reached up to pat one of the bales. "As luck would have it, the colonists have been growing hemp for years, for use in clothing, paper, natural oils, whatever. The female plants are necessary for cultivation, of course, but they're usually discarded during processing. After all, no one smokes the stuff anymore, except for the occasional eccentric like Ramirez. So . . ."

"So Coyote has tons of the stuff, and the *hjadd* are willing to trade for it."

"You're catching on." Morgan grinned. "We've already given them fifty pounds . . . a free sample, to whet their appetites . . . but this is the first large shipment. If all goes well, it'll become a major export item, with more to follow. . . ."

"Sure." I shrugged. "And who knows? After this, we can introduce them to tobacco. Maybe even opium."

Morgan glared at me, then turned to Ted. "Captain Lesh is over there. If you'll follow me, I'll introduce you so you can make the change of command."

"Thanks." Ted looked at Emily. "Emcee, once Rain checks the manifest, take everyone upstairs and get them settled in." He glanced at me. "You know your job, right?"

"Prep the boat for launch. Right." Once again, I gazed up at *Loose Lucy*. "When do you want to go?"

"Soon as possible," Morgan said, before Ted could respond. "And Mr. Truffaut . . . I'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from unkind remarks about my business. That last one was uncalled for."

I suppose I should have apologized, but I didn't. Instead, I just shrugged. Morgan gave me one last look, then turned to lead Ted away. Emily watched them go, then stepped closer to me.

"Word of advice," she said quietly. "Don't push it with Morgan. He could land you back in jail any time he wants."

I was tempted to ask where he'd find another shuttle pilot. Emily meant well, though, and there was no reason to piss her off. Besides, she

was right. As affable as Morgan Goldstein might appear, there was little doubt that he was a cunning businessman. People like that don't let anyone get between them and their money.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied, "but if . . ."

Suddenly, I forgot what I was about to say, for at that moment I looked past her to see a figure approaching us. And that was when I caught my first sight of Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda.

V

The moment I laid eyes on the Prime Emissary, I immediately knew who he . . . or rather, heshe . . . was. Even though heshe was dressed head-to-toe in a grey environment suit whose opaque faceplate rendered hisher features invisible, everyone on Earth had seen pictures of the hjadd chief delegate to Coyote. And I'd already been told, of course, that heshe was going to be another passenger on this voyage. Nonetheless, I was stunned to see himher walking toward us, escorted by two blueshirts.

Nor was I the only person in our group to be surprised. Ali took an involuntary step back, almost as if frightened by a creature that was a head shorter than any of us. Rain had been talking to a longshoreman; when she spotted the Prime Emissary, she quickly ended the conversation and hurried over to join us. And for the first time since our arrival at New Brighton, Ash seemed to take notice of what was going on.

"Hello, Jas." Emily raised her right hand, palm out and fingers spread apart. "Good to see you again."

"It is good to see you again as well." The voice that came from the grille beneath the faceplate was deep-throated yet oddly androgynous, almost as if an opera singer was concealed inside the suit. That notion was forgotten the moment the hjadd raised hisher own right hand; six webbed fingers, blunt but taloned, spread apart in an identical greeting. "Is this another member of your crew?"

Heshe meant me. "Umm . . . yes, I am," I replied, instinctively offering my hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Sa-Fhadda. My name is Jules Truffaut. I'm . . ."

A frog-like croak from the grille as the hjadd recoiled from me, hisher hand dropping to hisher side. I suddenly realized that I'd made a mistake. Before I could say anything, though, a voice spoke from behind my left shoulder.

"The Prime Emissary is offended," Ash murmured, standing close beside me. "Hjadd don't like to be touched by strangers unless they invite such contact. Also, Sa-Fhadda isn't hisher last name, but hisher caste and social status. Apologize at once."

I didn't know which was more surprising: the fact that a handshake could be offensive, or that Ash had finally spoken. "Sorry," I said, lowering my hand . . . and then, on sudden afterthought, hastily raising it again, in imitation of Emily's gesture. "I didn't know the correct form of address. Please forgive me."

A short hiss that might have come from an angry cat, then the helmeted head bobbed once on its long neck. "You are forgiven, Mr. Truffaut," heshe said. "You did not know better. And you may call me Jas."

Jas formally extended hisher own hand. I hesitated, then carefully

grasped it. Even through the thin plastic of Jas's glove, I could feel the warmth of hisher touch, offset by the hardness of hisher talons as they briefly stroked the inside of my palm. The last thing I'd expected to do this morning when I woke up was to shake hands with an alien; definitely a moment for my memoirs.

"Good," Ash said, still whispering to me. "Your apology has been accepted, and heshe has accepted you. Now release hisher hand, back away, and shut up."

I did as I was told, without another word. As Jas turned toward Emily, I glanced back at Ash. "Thanks. I . . ."

"Be quiet." His eyes flickered toward me from within his hood.

So much for gratitude. I looked back at Emily and Jas; the two of them had already walked away, involved in a quiet conversation. Ash slipped past me, his robe whisking across the concrete as he fell in behind them. Again, I was left to speculate about what his role in all this was. Liaison? Interpreter? How did he know what. . . ?

"Nice going there." Rain came up beside me. "Maybe you should leave diplomacy to the pros."

"Is that what Ash is? A diplomat?"

A moment of hesitation, then a sly smile stole across her lips. "You could say that. If I were you, though, I'd steer clear of him. He could make life hell for you if he really wanted to."

I remembered how I'd seen him standing outside my jail window, and the strange mental episode that I'd experienced a few moments later. I'd pretty much written off the incident as . . . well, I didn't know what it was, only that it was something I'd felt compelled not to explore. Before I could ask, though, Rain pushed a pad into my hands.

"Here's the manifest. I've checked it out, and everything looks okay. All you need to do is sign it, and we're good to go." I found the blank space marked PILOT and used my fingertip to scrawl my signature across the bottom of the screen. "Thanks," she said, taking it back from me. "Now let's see if you can get through the rest of the day without screwing up again."

"Hey, now wait a minute." I thought I'd made my peace with her, but here she was, busting my chops again. It was really getting on my nerves. "I'd appreciate a little respect, if it's not too much to ask."

"Respect is earned, not given." There was enough frost in her voice to turn a warm summer afternoon into a cold day in hell . . . which apparently was when she'd have anything kind to say to me. "Get us into orbit without killing everyone aboard, and I'll take it into consideration."

Then she walked off, leaving me to wonder once again whether this job might be more trouble than it was worth.

VI

Loose Lucy was aptly named. The cockpit looked as if it had been retrofitted at least twice since the shuttle rolled off the assembly line, with new control panels installed beside ones that probably had been in use when I was in high school. The first thing I did was check the control panels; the layout was slightly different from the one I'd learned to use in the tutorial, but they were nothing that I couldn't handle. The pilot's couch creaked no-

ticeably as I sat down, though, and the left armrest was wrapped with frayed ducttape. I'd been in flight simulators that were in better shape.

As pilot and co-pilot, Ted and I were the first to climb aboard, with the rest of the crew following us through the hatch to take seats in the couches arranged around the passenger compartment. There were eight in all, with one remaining vacant; that would belong to the chief engineer, who was waiting for us aboard the *Pride*. I noted that one of the couches was different from the rest; on closer examination, I saw that it had been designed to fit a hjadd. As I watched, Jas settled into it, hisher short legs and long torso comfortably finding room in a space that would have been painful for a human.

From his seat beside me, Ted quietly watched while I went through the prelaunch checklist. Satisfied that I knew what I was doing, he turned to make sure that everyone was strapped in. Rain was the last aboard; she waited on the ground until she was certain that our freight was safely stowed away before closing the cargo hatch and climbing the ladder up to the flight deck.

As soon as she was in her seat, I ordered the passenger hatch to be sealed. Once *Lucy* was airtight, I pressurized the compartment, then got on the comlink and requested gantry roll-back. Bright sunlight streamed through the cockpit windows as the shuttle emerged from beneath the tower's shadow; through my headset, I could hear the crosstalk among the ground crew as they cleared the pad. A few minutes later, traffic control informed me that airspace was clear and I had permission to launch.

One last check of all systems, with Ted making sure I hadn't forgotten anything, then I entered the flight program into the nav system and initiated the final launch sequence. At this point, I could have just as easily switched to autopilot, but I didn't do that. *Loose Lucy* was new to me, and I didn't know how much I trusted her. Besides, I wanted to show my new captain that I wasn't some rookie who'd leave everything to the comps.

So I cranked my seat back into reclining position, pulled the lapboard closer to my chest, and grasped the yoke with my left hand and the throttle bar with my right. When I had green lights across my console, I flipped open a candy-striped panel and pushed the big red button beneath it.

Loose Lucy might be an old bird, but she was no turkey. She rose from the pad quickly and smoothly, g-force pushing us back in our seats. The hull shook and rattled a bit as the shuttle began its ascent, but the noise quickly subsided as I shoved the stick all the way forward, replaced by a loud roar as the main engine went full throttle. The clouds above leaped toward us, then the shuttle punched through them.

The sky gradually grew darker, blue fading to black, until stars began to appear. And then we were in space, on our way to orbit. I throttled back the engine, then fired the RCS thrusters to roll the craft to starboard.

Through the forward windows, Coyote hove into view, a vast hemisphere of white-flecked green, the Great Equatorial River visible as a broad blue band that stretched to the distant horizon. Beyond the limb of the moon, Bear rose as an enormous crescent, its rings jutting out into space. A hell of a sight; I found myself wishing I wasn't a pilot, so that I could simply sit back and take it all in.

I didn't have that luxury, though. Using the nav system to get a precise fix on our target, I found the *Pride of Cucamonga* right where it was supposed to be, parked in stationary orbit several thousand miles above the equator. I could have shut down the engine and simply allowed *Lucy* to coast the rest of the way to her mother ship, but that would have meant that we'd have to orbit Coyote a few times, adding six to eight hours to our trip. The gauge told me that we had more than enough fuel for a direct ascent, so I kept the engines throttled up one-quarter percent, and programmed the comp for a trajectory that would get us there in just a couple of hours.

Once I was satisfied that everything was copasetic, I switched to autopilot, then returned my seat to upright position. "Everyone okay back there?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder. "Wasn't too rough, I hope."

A mumble from Rain that might have been a complaint, but I couldn't quite make out her words. "Gordon passed out," Emily said, "but otherwise he's all right."

"Gordon? Who's Gordon?"

"She means Ash. That's his first name." Ted cranked his own seat to horizontal position. "Good flying, kid. You can keep your job." He looked back at our passengers. "Mr. Goldstein? Jas? How are you doing?"

"Fine. Just fine." Judging from Morgan's tone of voice, I didn't have to see his face to know that it was probably a pale shade of green. "Jas is . . ."

"I am comfortable." If there was any emotion in his voice, the translation device of his suit masked it. "Thank you, Mr. Truffaut. I compliment your skills as a pilot."

I liked that. If the Prime Emissary didn't have any complaints, then Rain was in no position to argue. As usual, Ali remained stoical, although I wouldn't have expected otherwise. Pilots respect each other when they're behind the stick; if he had any criticism to offer, he'd tell me once we were out of the cockpit.

"Thank you, Jas. I appreciate it." I checked the comp again. "ETA in about two hours, thirty-six minutes, folks. So just sit back and enjoy the ride."

VII

Two and a half hours later, we rendezvoused with the *Pride of Cucamonga*.

Perhaps I was spoiled. The *Robert E. Lee*, after all, was a streamlined beauty to behold, and even cycleships like the *Victory* possessed a certain elegant symmetry. By comparison, the *Pride* was as ugly as a crowbar. About four hundred feet in length, the freighter was comprised of cylindrical subsections arranged in tandem, with the hab module at the bow and its massive fusion engine at the stern. Two enormous cargo modules, each resembling giant drums, protruded at perpendicular angles from either side of the hub just aft of the hab module, giving the ship a cruciform appearance. The service module at the midsection was jammed with maneuvering thrusters, auxiliary tanks, and radiators, while the deflector array stuck out from the prow like an immense wok.

As we drew closer, it became clear that the *Pride* was a spacecraft with more than a few billion miles to its logbook. Here and there along its hull,

I spotted plates that were of a slightly different color than the ones surrounding them, an indication that the ship had recently undergone major refit. There were blackened scorch marks beneath the thrusters, and the telemetry dish appeared to be a replacement.

I wasn't the only one who noticed these things. Ted studied the ship as I matched course with it, then looked back at Morgan. "Tell me again why we didn't rate a new ship."

"For its class, it's the best one available." Morgan unclasped his harness and pushed himself out of his couch. "Everything else in the Janus fleet is currently committed to other contracts. Besides, my engineers told me that it would be easier to refit an older vessel than build a new one."

"Refit . . . you mean repair, don't you?" I didn't look away from my controls.

"No, I mean refit. There were certain modifications that needed to be made for this mission . . . particularly to the navigation system." Taking hold of the back of my couch, Morgan pulled himself closer to the windows, inserting himself between Ted and me. "Once we show a profit, the company will have the capital to construct a new ship specifically designed for . . ."

"Mr. Goldstein, please . . ." Ted reached up to gently push the boss away. "Give us a little breathing room, okay?" He glanced at me. "How are you doing there?"

"So far, so good." Keeping one eye on the lidar and the other on the comp screen, I fired the pitch and yaw thrusters to put *Lucy* on a direct line with the main docking port, located on the hub between the two cargo containers. Once I was holding station about five hundred feet from the ship, I touched my headset wand. "*Pride of Cucamonga*, this is *Loose Lucy*. Do you copy?"

A moment passed, then a gruff male voice came through. "Affirmative, *Lucy*. Have you in sight, and you're clear to dock."

That had to be the chief engineer. I guessed that he was on the bridge. Obviously a man of few words. "Roger that, *Pride*," I replied. "Thank you."

"Need any help?" Ted asked quietly.

"No, thanks. Got it covered." To tell the truth, I was nervous as hell. Everything about both *Lucy* and the *Pride* gave me the uncertain feeling that neither craft was one hundred percent dependable, regardless of whatever Morgan had to say. Too late to chicken out now, though, so I opened the nose faring to expose the docking collar, and once I had the *Pride's* hub port lined up within the crosshairs of the forward radar, I fired aft thrusters and gently moved in.

I shouldn't have worried so much. *Lucy* was a good girl; she behaved herself as I coaxed her toward the docking port. Even so, I didn't breathe easy until the forward probe slid home and I felt the telltale thump of the flanges being engaged. An enunciator buzzed, confirming that we'd made a solid connection.

"Nice job," Emily said. "Couldn't have done better myself."

"Thank you." I safed the engines, then reached up to pressurize the forward airlock. "We're here, ladies and gentlemen . . . um, no offense, Prime Emissary."

"None taken." Again, the short, cat-like hiss that I'd learned to recognize as the hjadd equivalent of a chuckle. "My kind answers to both."

That earned a couple of laughs from everyone except Rain and Ash. I didn't have to look back to know that she continued to be unimpressed with me. As for Ash . . . well, he probably needed to either throw up or have a drink, whichever came first.

"All right, we're here." Ted unbuckled his harness, then pushed himself out of his seat. "So let's go aboard and see what this tub is made of."

EIGHT

Doc at the airlock . . . Rain in space . . . a definition of the blues . . . great minds think alike.

The *Pride of Cucamonga* looked a lot better inside than it did on the outside. For a freighter that had put in plenty of time on the Jovian run, it was in pretty good shape. Nonetheless, with the chipped iron-grey paint of its bulkheads and exposed conduits running across low ceilings, no one could have mistaken it for a passenger liner. The *Pride* was a workhorse, plain and simple.

One of the luxuries it didn't have was artificial gravity. Since the ship wasn't equipped with diametric drive, it also lacked a Millis-Clement field generator. And although the hub could be rotated to provide centrifugal force to the cargo modules, since we weren't carrying livestock the modules would be locked down for the duration of the journey. I was glad that I'd brought along a new pair of stickshoes; all the ones aboard had been used by the previous crew, and their insoles looked like fungal colonies.

The chief engineer met us at the airlock: Doc Schachner, a stocky gent in his mid-sixties who'd lost the hair on top of his head but made up for it with a thick white beard that went halfway down his chest. Doc knew Goldstein, and called him by his first name, something that Morgan seemed to tolerate only barely; I'd later learn that Doc had a history of disagreements with his boss that might have gotten him canned a long time ago were it not for the fact that the chief was almost always right.

And for good reason. I eventually learned that Edward J. Schachner had earned his nickname along with the doctorate in astronautical engineering he'd picked up at the University of Edinburgh. After spending a decade designing spacecraft for Janus, he'd decided that he'd rather fly spaceships than a drafting board. The *Pride* was one of the ships he'd built, and there probably wasn't a wire or rivet aboard that he didn't know like the back of his hand.

Doc wasn't one for small talk. A brief self-introduction was all we got before he escorted us from the airlock to the central access shaft that led through the ship's core. As he led us from the hub into the hab module, Doc paused every now and then to open pressure hatches leading from one deck to the next. As the last person in line, I quickly learned what it was like to be on the receiving end of his temper; when I neglected to close a hatch behind us, he made me go back and dog it tight, and after

that made sure that each hatch was shut before we moved on. Ted might be the captain, but the *Pride* was clearly Doc's ship, and he didn't leave anything to chance.

Deck Two contained the crew quarters, but before we got there, Doc stopped at Deck Three. Opening the hatch, he asked Jas to accompany him; during the *Pride's* refit, a separate cabin had been added specifically designed for hjadd passengers. So we waited in the shaft while Doc showed the Prime Emissary to hisher stateroom; when he returned a few minutes later, he took us the rest of the way to Deck Two.

Our quarters were located along a ring-shaped corridor that wound its way around the inside of the hab module. They were larger than the first-class cabins aboard the *Lee*, but not much; instead of bunks, we had sleep-sacks that could be strung up to form hammocks, and lockers instead of closets and shelves. No furniture, of course—a chair was unnecessary in zero-g, a desk worse than useless—but at least I had my own privy, even if the toilet had vacuum hoses and the bath stall was equipped with hot and cold running sponges. As luck would have it, my cabins were located next to Ash's; noting that the walls weren't very thick and that there was a vent between our rooms, I hoped that he didn't snore.

I didn't get much of a chance to make myself at home. I'd just swapped my boots for my stickshoes when Rain knocked on my door. Time to unload *Loose Lucy*, and she needed me to fly the cargo pod. So off I went to earn my paycheck.

And that's when my troubles began.

IX

Never take a job if you know you're going to be working for someone who has less experience than you do.

Although the *Pride* was a civilian ship, nonetheless there's a certain hierarchy aboard merchanters that's quasi-military in nature. In this instance, the quartermaster outranks the shuttle pilot when it comes to taking care of the payload. Therefore, Rain was my boss for this particular chore. Under any other circumstances, that wouldn't have been a problem, but from the moment we suited up for EVA, I knew working with her would be difficult.

The *Pride's* secondary airlock was located on the opposite side of the hub from where *Lucy* was docked. Before you cycled through it, you entered the ready room where the EVA gear was stowed. Prepping for a spacewalk isn't for the modest; it entails stripping down to your birthday suit in order to put on the one-piece undergarment that, among other things, collects your sweat and urine to be recycled as water and oxygen for the life-support system. If nudity is a problem, then you can always keep your back turned . . . but nonetheless, in a compartment little larger than a closet, it's hard to keep from bumping into the other guy.

Rain wasn't willing to trust me, despite my promises that I'd keep my hands to myself and not sneak a peek. Can't say that I blamed her; in zero-gee, it can be hard to be gallant, especially since you're having to use both hands to pull on the overgarment while attaching all the necessary lines and hoses. I had to wait outside while she suited up. That was my

first indication that she had precious little experience, because nearly an hour went by before she let me in . . . and then, as soon as I saw her, I noticed that she'd missed a couple of steps, not the least of which was neglecting to close the zipper on her left wrist, something that might have caused a blowout.

Rain didn't like it very much when I pointed this out to her, nor was she appreciative when I properly attached the electrical line from her backpack to her chest unit. In fact, she squawked as if I was trying to grope her, until she realized what I was trying to do and why. Then she insisted on waiting for me in the airlock while I suited up . . . a violation of safety protocols, since the buddy system calls for no one to enter an airlock alone.

Prude. I took my time getting into my gear, meaning that I was ready to go in twenty minutes. A final checkout of each other's suits, followed by a comlink test, then we put on our helmets, pressurized our suits, and voided the airlock.

The cargo pod was docked on the hub's outer hull. It was almost identical to the one I'd operated on Highgate, so nothing about it was unfamiliar. Nonetheless, I waited until Rain attached her safety line to a hook just outside the airlock, then made her way hand-over-hand along the outside of the hub until she reached *Loose Lucy*, before I climbed into the cockpit. She spacewalked well enough, but nonetheless I couldn't help but notice a certain clumsiness in the way she moved. It was obvious that she hadn't spent a lot of time in EVA.

Rain was . . . how old? Nineteen, maybe twenty? I had time to think about this while I waited for her to find her way to the shuttle. How much previous experience could she have had before Morgan hired her? Probably very little . . . especially since the Federation Navy only consisted of a handful of small ships, plus the *Lee*. So how come someone so young had gotten the job of quartermaster aboard a freighter, particularly one vested with such an important mission?

A bad sign, indeed. And it only got worse.

The way we were supposed to work was that, once Rain opened *Lucy's* cargo deck and climbed inside, she'd untie each bale and, one at a time, push them to the hatch. I would then use the pod to transfer the bales to the cargo modules, alternating between Cargo One and Cargo Two so that the payload would be evenly distributed on either side of the ship. Once the bales were aboard, Rain and I would enter the modules and tie them down, making sure that they were securely lashed to the inside decks before we closed the hatches.

It should have been a simple operation, one that would've taken a few hours at most. If I'd been working with a seasoned grunt, that is. But Rain seemed to have little idea of what she was doing. She struggled to untie lines, tumbled the bales toward the hatch and swore at me when I had trouble catching them with the pod's manipulators, and she frequently forgot the order in which we were supposed to reload them aboard the modules. Three times, I returned to the shuttle only to discover that she'd already pitched out another bale; on one occasion, I had to chase after a bale that had floated away from *Lucy*, barely managing to retrieve it before it drifted too far to be rescued.

None of these problems were her fault. They were always the result of my incompetence and stupidity. I was an oaf, an idiot, a doofus, an amateur, a complete zero, and God only knew how she'd been saddled with the likes of me. Even after Ted, overhearing her more unkind remarks over the comlink, told her to calm down and cooperate with me, she continued to insist upon doing things her way.

It wasn't until Emily suited up and came down to give us a hand that we finally managed to get the shuttle unloaded. I docked the pod, but instead of helping them secure the bales, I went straight to the bridge. Didn't bother to take off my suit; simply shelved the helmet, plugged the backpack into its recharger unit, took off my gloves, then hauled myself up the access shaft to Deck One.

The command center was a circular compartment ringed by rectangular portholes, with a hexagonal control console dominating the center of the room. A hologram image of the *Pride* floated above the table, with close-up views of the ship displayed on flatscreens suspended from the low ceiling. Ted was at the engineering station, peering over Doc's shoulder as they ran through a systems check; on the other side of the table, Ali was seated at the helm. Everyone looked up as I entered through the floor hatch. The women's voices were coming through the ceiling speakers, so no doubt they'd heard everything that had gone on between Rain and me.

"Something on your mind, Jules?" Ted turned to me as I used a ceiling rail to make my way across the compartment.

"Damn right." I was trying hard to keep my temper in check, but I wasn't succeeding. "I can't work with her, skipper. She's insane."

"Hmm . . . yes, I think I see your point." He thoughtfully stroked his chin as if pondering a solution to the problem. "Well, I'd hate to lose you, but I suppose Emcee can do double-duty as shuttle pilot." He reached to his earpiece. "I'll put in a call to New Brighton, have someone bring up a skiff to take you home."

"Whoa, wait a minute! That's not what I . . ."

"You just accused one of your crewmates of insanity. Since I picked Rain myself, I suppose that means that you lack respect for my judgment. And if you're unable to work with either of us . . ."

"Just a second! I . . ."

"I'll give you—" Ted glanced at his watch "—sixty seconds. But that's all. We're rather busy just now."

He wasn't joking. Ted Harker might be an easy-going chap, but no one questioned his authority on the bridge of his ship and got away with it. I took a deep breath, started over again. "Sir, I have total respect for your judgment. And . . . all right, maybe she isn't insane. But you heard what happened out there. . . ."

"I did, indeed. All of us did. That's why my wife went down below." His eyes narrowed. "Which is where you should be right now. Why aren't you?"

"Because . . . Captain, how much experience does Rain have with this sort of thing? Seriously?"

"Very little. In fact, this is only her third time in space . . . and her first assignment as quartermaster."

I stared at him. "Her first . . . what did she do before then?"

"She worked groundside at New Brighton for eight months before signing on with Janus. After that, two orbital sorties aboard cargo shuttles, unloading freight from the *Lee*. True, she hasn't logged as many hours as you have, but she takes her job seriously and I have complete confidence in her. I'm sorry that you have problems working for someone younger than you, but . . ."

"No, sir, that's not it. It's just that . . . look, she's been on my case ever since I met her. I've been trying to get along with her, but it's gotten to the point where . . ." Again, I hesitated. "If you really want me to leave the ship, then I will. I can't work with someone who carries a chip on her shoulder all the time."

Ted didn't say anything for a moment, and I wondered if I'd just talked myself out of a job. Behind him, Doc was quietly shaking his head. An old pro, he knew how petty feuds among crew members could escalate if left unresolved.

"Very well," Ted said at last. "I'll have a few words with Rain once she gets off duty, ask her to calm down. If she continues to harass you, I want you to let me know. As for now . . . since you're here, I have a small errand for you." He glanced over his shoulder at Doc. "Can you get along without me for a minute?" The chief nodded, and Ted unstuck his shoes from the deck. Grabbing hold of a ceiling rail, he pulled himself around the console. "Come along, please."

I followed Ted to the other side of the bridge, where we stopped beside a locker recessed in the bulkhead behind his chair. "One thing you should know about Rain," he said quietly once we were away from the others. "She comes from a rather powerful family on Coyote, and they have a lot of pull with Janus."

"So Morgan insisted that you hire her?" I was no stranger to cronyism—the Western Hemisphere Union is rife with it—but this was something I didn't expect.

"Pretty much so, yes . . . although I meant what I said about having confidence in her." He produced a key ring from his vest and began sorting through it. "But the Thompson Wood Company is a major investor in Morgan's company, and if Molly Thompson wants her great-niece to have a job . . ."

"I see."

"Yes, well . . ." Ted inserted a key into the locker. "Off the record, I think she's rather nervous about all this, so she's taking it out on you. Once you get to know her, you may find that she's actually quite nice. But she's had a tough time lately, what with her brother and . . ." He stopped himself. "Sorry. Think I said too much. And it's none of our business, besides."

That was the second time I'd heard about Rain's brother. The captain had clearly overstepped the boundaries, though, and I wasn't about to press the issue, not when I'd come so close to getting fired. So I said nothing as he opened the locker and reached inside.

He withdrew a ceramic jug, its neck sealed with a cork stopper. Since I'd spent some time in Liberty's taverns, I immediately recognized it for what it was: a quart of corn liquor, known on Coyote as bearshine.

"I've trusted you with one secret already," Ted murmured as he handed it to me. "Now I'm going to trust you with another. I want you to take this to Ash, and be quiet about it."

"Yeah. Okay." I tucked the jug under my left arm; Ted added an empty squeezebulb, which I stuck in a thigh pocket of my suit. "He's an alcoholic, isn't he?"

"I suppose. But again, he's here because Morgan insists, so what he does in his cabin isn't our concern." Ted closed the locker. "I'm keeping him on a short leash, though, and that means keeping his liquor supply under lock and key. This should be enough to get him to where we're supposed to go . . . after that, he'll have to work for the rest."

"And what is his job, exactly?"

"He . . . ah, perhaps we should call him an interpreter, and leave it at that." He nodded toward the floor hatch. "Now off with you. Change out of your suit, then pay a visit to Mr. Ash. I'll have a word with Ms. Thompson. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir," I murmured. "Thank you." Ted nodded, then began to make his way back across the bridge.

I stared at the jug of bearshine. A brat and a wetbrain. This mission was getting stranger by the minute.

X

I heard Ash's guitar as soon as I opened the hatch to Deck Two, melancholy chords that drifted down the corridor. Whatever he was playing, it had no clear rhyme or pattern, but nonetheless spoke of loneliness and regret. Like finding a bouquet of dying roses in the heart of a machine.

I lingered just inside the deck hatch for a few moments before I remembered why I was there. Grasping the ceiling rail with my free hand, I pulled myself down the corridor toward Ash's cabin. I was trying to be as quiet as possible, not wanting to disturb him, yet the moment before I raised my hand to knock on his door, the music suddenly stopped.

"Come in," he called out. "It's not locked."

How did he know I was there? Perhaps he'd heard the deck hatch open, but still . . . trying to shake off the willies, I slid open the door.

Ash floated in midair, cross-legged and upside-down, one foot hooked on a ceiling rail, guitar nestled within his arms. Fashioned of fine-grained brown spruce, with silver strings running along a black fingerboard, it was as beautiful as the sounds it produced. It was the first time I'd seen him without his robe; he wore a tan cotton tunic and matching trousers, loose-fitting and almost monkish in appearance. Ash himself was older than I originally thought: lean and bony, with a mop of brown hair growing grey at the temples. His eyes were surrounded by dark rings, as if he hadn't slept well in years.

"Hi, Gordon," I began. "Captain sent me down here to . . ."

"Bring me a bottle. Yes, I can see." He idly strummed at his guitar. "You can put it over there," he added, nodding toward a net for personal items that dangled from the bulkhead next to his sleepsack. "I'll get to it later."

Apparently he wasn't a social drinker. Well, that made sense; I'd met a few drunks, and the hard-core boozehounds drink alone. Twisting around so that I could attach my shoes to the floor, I stepped into the cabin. "Nice guitar. Heard it down the hall."

"Thanks." He didn't look up at me. "And by the way, I prefer to be called Ash. No one calls me by my first name."

"Sure . . . sorry." I stuck the jug into the net, then pulled the squeeze-

bulb out of my pocket. "Ever use one of these before? You need to unscrew the top, see, like this—" I demonstrated by removing the cap "—then fit it over the . . ."

"I can manage." Irritation crossed his face. "Incidentally, just so that you know . . . I'm not an alcoholic." His fingers plucked out sharp, discordant notes as he spoke, as if to accentuate his words. "Or a drunk, or a wetbrain, or whatever else you've decided to label me."

That brought me up short. I stared at him, trying to figure out what I'd said or done to lead him to guess what I thought of him. "I didn't . . ."

"Of course you didn't. You're being polite. But I can . . ." A brief glare, then he looked away again. "Never mind. Just in a mood, that's all."

"Sure. No problem." He was making me nervous, so I screwed the cap back on the squeezebulb and stuck it in the net beside the jug. "Well, look, if you need anything else, I'm right next door."

Ash didn't respond. Seeing that my presence wasn't wanted, I turned to leave. I was halfway to the door when he suddenly spoke up.

"Galaxy Blues," he said.

I stopped, looked back at him again. "Excuse me?"

"The song I was playing . . . it's called 'Galaxy Blues.'" His hands returned to the strings, and once again I heard the same progression I'd caught while I was in the corridor. "Been working on it for awhile," he went on, his eyes still avoiding mine. "Kind of weird, I know, but . . . well, I'm getting there."

"Sounds nice." I hesitated. "Got any words for it?"

"Nope. No lyrics." Ash glanced up at me, and I was surprised to see a sly smile on his face, as if he was sharing a private joke. "That's what I like about music. You don't need words to get a point across. Just screws things up, really, when all you really should have is . . ."

His right hand abruptly shifted further up the neck of his guitar, and he produced a quick succession of warbling, high-pitched notes. "That's you . . . trying hard to rationalize something that doesn't really need to make sense."

I felt my face grow warm, but before I could say anything, his smile became a knowing grin, and the progression drifted to a lower, more solemn bass sound. "And that's what happens when you find that nothing really fits into your safe and conservative world-view. But believe me, out here in the great beyond—" a snake-like ramble of notes—"everything is strange. The sooner you get used to that, the better off you'll be."

He was beginning to piss me off. "What are you, some kind of . . . ?"

Something cold crept down my back as I suddenly recalled the first time I'd seen him, peering in through the window of my jail cell. As incredible—let's face it, as impossible—as it seemed, nonetheless it was the only explanation that made sense.

"Mind reader?" Ash chuckled as he pushed aside his guitar. Uncoiling himself from his lotus position, he pushed himself off the ceiling. "You could say that," he said as he glided over to where I'd left the jug. "Or maybe I'm just an astute observer."

Perhaps he was only that . . . but all the same, his hands trembled as he uncorked the jug, and he swore under his breath as a few globular

droplets of bearshine floated away before he managed to fit the squeeze-bulb around the neck. Ash finally managed to fill the bulb and close the jug again without wasting any more booze; he looked almost infantile as he put the bulb's nipple to his lips and took a slug that would have choked anyone else.

"You can go now," he rasped, as he pinched the bulb shut. "Come back again when you've got more of this."

A brisk wave of his hand as he dismissed me. No doubt he'd spend the rest of the day getting bombed. Once again, I turned toward the door . . . but not before he had some parting words for me. "She really does like you, y'know," he murmured. "Just as much as you're attracted to her. Too bad neither of you will admit it to yourselves."

I almost asked how he could possibly be aware of these things . . . but I already knew the answer to that, didn't I? And just then, I only wanted to put a wall between us. Hoping that a bulkhead was enough to separate my mind from his, I hurried from his cabin, shutting the door behind me.

And found Morgan Goldstein waiting for me in the corridor.

"What are you doing in there?" It wasn't a polite question, and there was no mistaking the anger in his eyes.

"Captain Harker told me to bring him a jug of bearshine." I pretended innocence, even though it was clear that he'd been eavesdropping all the while. "Just stopped to have a chat. Anything wrong with that?"

"Yes." Morgan kept his voice low. "From now on, you're to leave him alone. If anyone asks you to bring him anything, you come to me first. I'll . . ."

"Pardon me, sir, but if the skipper gives me an order, it's my duty to carry it out. I'm under no obligation to ask your permission to do that." I would have turned away from him, but he was blocking the way to my cabin. "Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"Of course . . . you're right." His manner softened. "My apologies, Mr. Truffaut. I forgot that you were only following orders." Morgan moved aside to let me pass. "But in the future, I'd appreciate it if you'd . . . minimize your contact with Ash. He's quite sensitive, and needs all the privacy he can get."

"I'll try to keep that in mind." Unsticking my shoes from the floor, I started to push myself down the passageway. But then . . .

"Just one question, though," I said, grabbing the ceiling rail and turning back to him again. "Does he drink so much to keep from hearing everyone else's thoughts?"

Morgan's face went pale. His mouth fell open, but for a moment he couldn't respond. Maybe he was having trouble coming up with an adequate lie. Whatever the reason, I realized that my guess was right on target.

"He just drinks too much," he said at last, his voice little more than a whisper. "If I were you, though, I'd keep my distance." Then he twisted himself around and headed toward the deck hatch.

I went to my cabin, but even after I closed the door, I was aware of Ash's presence. Through the wall vent, I heard the sound of his guitar. After a little while, though, it stopped, and all I could hear was his voice.

I couldn't tell, though, whether he was laughing or weeping.

Off to see the lizard . . . peace with Rain . . . the Order of the Eye.

XI

We remained in orbit overnight, Coyote time, and next morning after breakfast the *Pride of Cucamonga* headed out for Rho Coronae Borealis.

As customary, all hands assembled in the command center for final countdown. As shuttle pilot, there was little for me to do; once I verified that *Loose Lucy* was ready to serve as a lifeboat in the unlikely event that we'd have to abandon ship, my only job was to take a seat and watch while everyone else went about getting the *Pride* underway. Yet Emily was nowhere to be seen until fifteen minutes before launch; when she finally showed up, Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda was with her.

This was the first time since coming aboard that I'd seen the Prime Emissary. Jas had remained in hisher quarters while the crew made preparations for the journey, and I'd expected himher to stay there until the *Pride* arrived at its destination. So I was surprised when the hjadd followed Emily through the manhole into the command center.

Everyone stopped what they were doing as the first officer led Jas onto the bridge. As always, the Prime Emissary wore hisher environment suit; I would've thought that heshe would be encumbered by it, yet heshe was surprisingly nimble. Reaching up to grasp a ceiling rail with a six-fingered hand, Jas lingered near the floor hatch for a few moments, the opaque faceplate of hisher helmet turning first one way, then the other, as heshe gazed around the deck.

"Guess heshe decided to come up and join us," I murmured to Rain. We were seated off to one side of the control console, near the life support station; like myself, she had little to do just then. "Must have gotten curious about how we do things up here."

Rain gave me a patronizing look, but if she had any insults in mind, she refrained from giving voice to them. "More than curiosity," she whispered. "Without himher, we're not going anywhere."

This was the first time she'd spoken to me since our altercation the day before. When I'd seen her a couple of hours earlier, during breakfast in the wardroom on Deck Two, she had avoided me as much as possible. Ted must have had a few words with her. Well, if she was willing to bury the hatchet, so was I.

"How do you figure that?" I asked.

"You don't know?" She darted a look at me, and I shook my head. "Watch and learn," she added. "This is where it gets interesting."

Ted unbuckled his harness and rose from his seat. "Prime Emissary, welcome," he said, raising his left hand in the hjadd gesture of greeting. "The *Pride of Cucamonga* is ready to depart. If we may have your permission. . . ?"

"You have my permission." As before, an androgynous voice emitted from the mouth grille of hisher helmet. "Please direct me to the navigation system."

"It would be my honor." Careful to avoid touching the Prime Emissary, he extended a hand toward the helm. "This way, please."

Jas followed Ted across the command center. As they approached the helm, Ali turned around in his seat. I couldn't help but notice his sour expression, and wondered whether our pilot harbored a secret revulsion for the hjaad. I wasn't the only one who saw this. On the other side of the deck, Ash was seated next to Morgan Goldstein. Although he once again wore his robe, I caught a glimpse of the sickened look on his face. Goldstein must have observed this, too, because he leaned closer to Ash and whispered something. Ash didn't respond, but instead nodded ever so slightly. Ash had picked up on something . . . that is, if I was right, and he was a telepath of some sort.

Ted stopped beside Ali's console. "Mr. Youssef, if you will . . ."

Ali said nothing, but instead typed a few commands into his keyboard before shrinking away from Jas. If the Prime Emissary noticed the pilot's reaction, he said nothing. Instead, he reached into a pocket of his environment suit, then pulled out a small object about the size and shape of a datafiche.

"That's the bridge key," Rain said quietly. "Until Jas uses it, we're not going anywhere."

Now I understood. One of the things the *Galileo* survivors had learned was that the hjaad belonged to something called the *Talus*, a loose coalition of alien races that developed the technology to build starbridges in order to travel to other worlds. The main purpose of the Talus was to provide trade and cultural exchange, but it also made sure that the galaxy remained at peace. In order to prevent one race from attacking or invading another, each member of the Talus protected the starbridges of their home systems by means of hyperlink transceivers, each of which was accessed via its own individually coded signal. Unless one race provided another with a key containing that signal, their starbridges would remain closed, and navigation through hyperspace would be impossible.

One of the conditions the hjaad had made upon establishing contact with humankind was that we would be unable to travel to Rho Coronae Borealis without their express permission. That could only be granted if they transmitted a coded signal via hyperlink to their own starbridge. This was the principal reason why no human ship had visited Hjaar since the return of the *Galileo* survivors; until now, only hjaad vessels were equipped with the proper navigation equipment.

"So Jas is carrying the hjaad key with him," I whispered. "Guess they're not quite ready to trust us."

Rain nodded. We watched as Jas moved toward a rectangular box that had been installed in the center of the nav station. Featureless save for a narrow slot at its top and a reflective black surface beneath it, the box remained inert until the Prime Emissary slid the key into the slot. The panel glowed to life, emitting a blue-green glow. Jas removed the glove of his left hand, and I caught a glimpse of mottled brown flesh, leathery and reptilian, as he laid his palm against the panel.

Its surface became bright orange, and vertical bars of alien script that vaguely resembled Faesi scrolled down it. A small drawer slid open from the bottom of the box, revealing a narrow row of buttons. Extending the middle finger of his hand, Jas delicately pushed the buttons in what appeared to be a predetermined sequence. The script changed, the panel became purple, and the drawer slid shut once more.

"The code has been entered, Captain Harker," Jas said, his voice a low purr. "You may proceed."

"Thank you, Prime Emissary." Ted turned to Emily. "Contact the gatehouse, Emcee, and inform them we're on our way." Then he tapped Ali on the shoulder. "Proceed with final countdown for main engine ignition."

Ali nodded. He waited until Jas moved away from the helm, then swiveled his chair back toward the console and began entering commands into his keyboard. At her station on the other side of the table, Emily was murmuring into her headset, telling Starbridge Coyote that we were about to launch. Ted watched as Jas put his glove back on. "We'll be ready to go in about five minutes. If you'd like to stay here, we can . . ."

"Thank you, Captain, but I would prefer to return to my quarters." Turning away from him, Jas almost seemed to disregard Ted. "Would you please have a member of your crew take me back?"

"Certainly." Ted looked around the command center. Emily was busy, and both Doc and Ali were needed on the bridge just then. On the other side of the deck, Goldstein was already unfastening his harness. Then Ted's gaze fell upon me. "Jules, if you please. . . ?"

Goldstein's eyes widened, and there was no missing the scowl on his face. Before he could protest, though, I snapped open my harness. "I'd be glad to, sir," I said, pushing myself out of my chair. "If it's all right with the Prime Emissary, that is."

Ted looked at Jas. His head moved back and forth upon his long neck; at first I thought he was objecting, until I remembered that this was the hadd equivalent of a nod. Then Rain spoke up. "Skipper, may I join them? With the Prime Emissary's permission, of course."

Ted looked dubious. "I don't know why we need to send two . . ."

"You are curious?" Jas's helmet turned toward her, and Rain nodded. "Very well. I would be delighted to have guests . . . if your captain approves."

Ted hesitated. "Very well . . . but don't overstay your welcome, either of you."

"Thank you, sir." Rain unbuckled her harness, then rose from her seat. "After you," she said to me, gesturing toward the access shaft.

I'd be lying if I said that I was pleased to have Rain tag along. Perhaps we were getting along a little better, but I didn't want to have her hen-pecking me all the way down to Deck Three. Besides, I wanted Jas all to myself. Call it selfish, but how often in life does one get the chance to have private time with an alien?

Nothing I could do about it, though, so I pushed myself over to the hatch and pulled it open. From the corner of my eye, I saw the jealous scowl on Morgan's face, yet I couldn't help but notice that Ash was grinning broadly, as if he was enjoying his own private joke . . . or perhaps, savoring his patron's irritation.

Then I ducked down the manhole and—with Jas close behind me and Rain bringing up the rear—began to make my way down the access shaft.

XII

None of us said anything until we reached Deck Three, but three bells rang just as we entered the passageway, warning us that the main engine ignition was imminent.

I had just enough time to brace my hands against the corridor walls

and rest my feet on the floor before a prolonged shudder passed through the ship. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure that the others were all right; Jas's broad feet had found the carpet as well, and although Rain had been caught off guard, she'd quickly recovered by grabbing hold of the ceiling rail and planting the soles of her stickshoes against the carpet. For the next fifteen minutes or so, we would enjoy one-third gravity while the *Pride* accelerated to cruise velocity.

"Well, we're off," I said, stating the obvious if only for the sake of conversation. Lowering my hands, I stepped aside to make way for Jas. "Prime Emissary, if you'd like to lead the way. . . ?"

"Thank you." As the *hjadd* moved past me, I caught my reflection in hisher faceplate. "There is no need to be so formal, Mr. Truffaut," heshe added. "You may call me Jas."

"Uh, sure . . . right." I'd forgotten that he'd told me so before. Behind us, Rain was closing the deck hatch. I waited until she'd dogged it shut, then followed Jas down the corridor. "Thank you for letting me . . . I mean, both of us . . . see your quarters."

A sibilant hiss from hisher mouthpiece. "The courtesy is long overdue," Jas said as heshe led us past the medical bay. "We have allowed only a few of your kind to enter our compound on Coyote. Perhaps the time has come for us to be less jealous of our privacy. Very soon we will be arriving at *Talus qua'spah*. A little cultural acclimation is desirable."

"Talus pah-squa. . . ?" I stumbled over the word. "I'm sorry, but what. . . ?"

"Talus qua'spah. In your language, the House of the Talus." Jas came a halt beside an unmarked hatch. A black plate had been set within it; once again, heshe removed hisher left glove, then placed hisher palm against it. "That is only an approximate translation of what it really means, but it will suffice."

The panel turned purple, then the hatch slid open, revealing a small antechamber that I assumed was an internal airlock. Jas stepped into it, then turned to look back at us. "Please remain here until I summon you. I must prepare myself for visitors." Then heshe touched a button beside the door, and the hatch closed once more.

That left Rain and me alone in the corridor. An uncomfortable silence settled between us. With nothing to say or do, I gazed at the bulkhead, idly speculating how much effort it must have taken Janus's engineers to retrofit this part of the ship to *hjadd* specifications. I was beginning to count the rivets when Rain quietly cleared her throat.

"I just want to . . ." She paused, started again. "Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. I mean, about what happened during load-in."

"Don't worry about it." I continued to study the bulkhead.

"No, really . . . I mean it." Putting herself between me and the wall so that I couldn't ignore her, she looked me straight in the eye. "You knew what you were doing out there . . . better than I did, to tell the truth . . . and I was just trying to see if I could piss you off."

"Yeah, well, you succeeded."

"Uh-huh. I've been told I have a talent for that," A crooked smile which quickly faded. "Ted told me that you almost quit."

That wasn't *quite* what had happened, but I wasn't about to correct her if it made her feel guilty. "Believe me," she went on, "that's not what I want. I just . . . look, can we still be friends? I promise that I won't snap at you anymore."

I could tell that this was a sincere effort to make up. I was still a little angry about the things she'd said to me, but if she was willing to apologize, it would have been churlish of me to refuse. "Yeah, all right," I said, and as an afterthought offered my hand. "Case closed."

"Okay. Case closed." Rain grinned as she took my hand. I was surprised by how soft her touch was, and was almost reluctant to let go. "Glad to put that behind us."

"Yeah, well . . . so am I."

Another silence fell between us. Perhaps we'd ceased fire, but there were still old wounds that hadn't healed. The hatch remained shut, and I wondered what Jas was doing in there. But there was something else that roused my curiosity . . .

"Pardon me, but may I ask a personal question?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "Depends how personal it is."

I hesitated. Too late to back down now, though, so I forged ahead. "Yesterday, when we were at breakfast and talking about my brother, I happened to mention yours, and that set you off." There was a spark within her eyes, and I quickly raised my hand. "Hey, I'm not trying to pick another fight. I'd just like to know . . . what was it that I said about him that got you so riled?"

"You didn't know?" Rain stared at me. "No one told you?"

"I'm new around here, remember? I couldn't find my way to the out-house without a map."

That brought another smile to her face. "At least you admit that," she said with a slight laugh before becoming somber again. "It's not something I like to talk about, but . . . well, you're not the only one with a black sheep in the family." She looked down at the floor. "My brother killed my father."

Of all the things she could have said to me, nothing could have been more unexpected. Now it was my turn to be apologetic. "I . . . I'm sorry, I didn't . . ."

"No, of course not. Like you said, there's no reason why you should've known." Rain shook her head. "I guess I've become so used to having people talk about him behind my back, it's like I have it tattooed on my forehead."

She let out her breath as a tired sigh. "My brother Hawk . . . who's about your age, by the way . . . murdered my father. *Our* father, I mean. There's a lot of people who say he had it coming . . . my father was a mean drunk, and even my mother says he was a bastard, which was why they were separated . . . but all the same, Hawk shouldn't have . . ."

She broke off when the hatch abruptly slid open, a silent invitation for us to enter. "Guess that means we can come in," I said, making a courtly bow. "Ladies first . . ."

"Thank you." Rain seemed to be just as happy to be interrupted. Not that I could blame her, but Jas couldn't have picked a worse moment. Yet I let the subject drop as we stepped into the antechamber.

XIII

The airlock was a small foyer just large enough for the two of us, with an identical hatch on the opposite side. Once the outer hatch closed behind us, the ceiling lit with a pale yellow luminescence. "*Welcome*," said Jas, his voice coming from a speaker beside a small control panel. "*Before*

I repressurize the room you are in, you will need to put on breathing masks. You will find them in the compartment to your right."

Rain turned around, located a small candy-striped panel recessed within the wall; inside were two full-face air masks. We slipped them on, and I helped Rain activate the miniature oxygen-nitrogen cylinders on either side of the lower jaw. Jas must have been observing us, because as soon as we were ready, there was a faint buzz and then the airlock began to repressurize.

We could've breathed the air within Jas's quarters, but not for very long. Watching the digital gauge on the control panel, I saw the atmospheric pressure drop 250 millibars while the NO₂ content increased by 30 percent. Without air masks, we would have succumbed to nitrogen narcosis before fainting from lack of oxygen. The change-out took about five minutes; when it was done, there was another buzz, then the inner hatch revolved open.

We walked into what had once been the ship's lounge before it was converted into a cabin suitable for hjaad passengers: a large suite divided into three rooms, two of them serving as private sleeping quarters and the third as a sitting room. At least heshe had furniture, even if it was designed to accommodate their shorter legs and longer torsos; I noticed that the couch and chair were equipped with safety harnesses. There was even what appeared to be a small galley, no doubt stocked with vegetarian food palatable to the hjaad. If there was a privy, I didn't see it. Yet other than a porthole, the cabin was spartan, the ceiling rails lending it the same utilitarian appearance as the rest of the ship.

But the surroundings didn't catch my attention so much as Jas himher-self. Now that the Prime Emissary no longer needed to wear hisher environment suit, heshe had changed into a long, toga-like robe that looked like silk yet seemed to shimmer with red and purple radiance. Hisher head, resembling that of a turtle only with a short fin on the back of hisher skull, rose from the high collar of hisher robe, while the hands I'd glimpsed earlier were folded together within bell sleeves embroidered with intricate designs.

"Please, come in," heshe said, "Make yourselves comfortable." A six-fingered hand, its talons white against the dark brown of hisher skin, emerged from a sleeve in the gesture of welcome. "I'm afraid I cannot offer refreshment, but I doubt you would enjoy anything that I eat or drink."

When Jas spoke, I heard two voices: the familiar one that addressed us in Anglo, which came from the grille of a small device that heshe wore around hisher neck, and the low-pitched series of hisses, croaks, and whistles that matched the movements of hisher mouth. The Prime Emissary didn't know our language; heshe merely possessed the means to have it translated for himher. The device heshe wore around hisher neck apparently did the trick; a slender prong was suspended in front of hisher lipless mouth, while thin wires led to small caps that covered the membranes on either side of hisher head.

"No need to apologize." Rain recovered more quickly than I did; I was getting over my first sight of Jas without hisher environment suit. "Once we reach your world, maybe we will have a chance to sample your cuisine."

"Uh . . . yeah," I stuttered. "I'd like that a lot, too." I was at a loss for what else to say. "Umm . . . nice place you have here."

Lame, but Extraterrestrial Diplomacy 101 wasn't a course I'd taken at the Academy. Whatever I said, though, was apparently enough to tickle hisher funny bone—where that was located, I hadn't a clue—because it was received by a short, high-pitched hiss. Jas's heavy-lidded eyes, which bulged from the front of hisher skull, closed slightly.

"Your people have done well to accommodate us," heshe replied. "Perhaps we will be able to satisfy your curiosity about our food, once we have arrived at Talus qua'spah."

I was still getting over the spooky way hisher eyes moved on their own when Jas stepped a little closer. "However," heshe continued, "our time is short, and you will soon need to return to your duties. Therefore, I will ask the question that I would like to have answered, if I may."

"Question?" That startled me. "Ah . . . yeah, sure, whatever you . . ."

Rain's cough was muffled by her air mask, but I heard it nonetheless. "Of course, Prime Emissary," she said, interrupting me, "although you'll have to forgive us if we're not very helpful. After all, we're ixnay on the alktay."

I caught her meaning and dummied up, hoping that Jas's translator wasn't as efficient as it seemed. Apparently it wasn't up to pidgin Anglo, because Jas went quiet for a moment, the fin on hisher head rising ever so slightly. "Yes, certainly," heshe responded after a second. "I understand. But nonetheless, I'd like to know . . . are there members of the Order of the Eye aboard this ship?"

I didn't have to pretend ignorance. "Sorry. Don't know what you're talking about." I glanced at Rain. "You?"

"Neither do I." She shook her head, but something in her eyes told me otherwise. "Is that something you've heard about on Coyote?"

Jas's fin rose a little more, hisher eyes twitching back and forth. "A rumor, perhaps little more," heshe responded, "yet enough to rouse our interest." A short pause. "One of your passengers . . . Gordon Ash . . . we have reason to believe belongs to this group. Do you know anything of this?"

"Nope. Nothing at all." I shrugged, hoping that my lie was convincing. "Just that he drinks a lot, that's all."

"Drinks?" The hjadd's left eye rotated toward me.

"He means alcohol. An affliction among my kind." Rain was about to continue when, from outside the room, we heard four bells, giving us the one-minute warning that the main engine was about to shut down. "We should go," she said, glancing at her watch. "Many thanks for your hospitality, Prime Emissary."

"The pleasure has been mine." Jas folded hisher hands together and bowed from the waist. "Feel free to visit me again."

Neither of us said much to each other as we cycled back through the airlock. The main engine cut off while Rain and I were still inside; we grasped handrails along the walls, and once the atmosphere returned to normal, we removed our air masks and returned them to their compartment. But as soon as we'd left the airlock and moved far enough down the passageway that I was sure Jas couldn't hear us, I pulled her aside.

"All right, now," I said, keeping my voice low. "How about telling me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Her expression remained neutral.

"C'mon . . . you know exactly what I'm talking about." I nodded in the direction of Jas's cabin. "This business with the Order of the Eye. You know something I don't."

"I don't know what you're . . ."

"Ash reads minds." Her face went pale as I said this, and I went on. "I don't know how he does it, but . . . well, it's there, and don't try to pretend that I'm wrong."

Rain glanced both ways, as if to make sure that we were alone. "Okay, you're right," she replied, her voice little more than a whisper. "Ash is a telepath . . . or at least strongly empathic. That's why Morgan brought him along . . . to verify whatever the hjadd have to say to us, since we still don't know their language even though they're able to interpret ours. We've tried to keep this from the hjadd, but apparently they've already figured it out."

Despite the fact that she'd confirmed what I had already suspected, I couldn't help but feel a chill. "How did Ash learn to do that? This is . . . I mean, I've never met anyone who . . ."

"Not on Earth, no. But in the last few years, a few people on Coyote have developed the ability to read minds . . . or at least pick up emotions." She hesitated. "Rumor has it that it comes from long-term exposure to pseudo-wasps. Supposedly they belong to a cult that calls itself the Order of the Eye."

I knew about pseudo-wasps: a flying insect native to Coyote, its sting contained a venom that produced low-level hallucinations among humans. There were even people who ingested the venom as a recreational drug; some of it had found its way to Earth, where it was sold on the black market. This was the first time I'd ever heard of it producing telepathic abilities, though. If it hadn't been for my earlier encounter with Ash, I would have discounted it as hearsay.

"And Ash belongs to it?" I asked.

"I've heard that the Order got started by someone who used to work for Morgan. That's how Ash was able to hook up with him . . . Morgan has been bankrolling them on the sly." Rain shrugged. "It's only when Ash is drunk that he can't hear what's going on inside other people's heads. That's why Morgan had Ted bring along a couple of jugs of bearshine."

I'd figured that out already. If Ash was loaded most of the time, he wouldn't be able to hear the thoughts of everyone else aboard. Even Goldstein wouldn't want Ash competent all the time, just when he wished Ash to be so . . . say, when Morgan had to negotiate with the hjadd, and therefore wanted to have a level playing field.

"So Ash is Morgan's ringer," I said, and Rain nodded. "Sounds like Jas got wind of it, though. Are you going to tell him?"

Rain shook her head. "Not if I don't have to," she said, pushing herself toward the deck hatch. "None of my business, and I'd just as soon not have anything to do with Ash if I can help it." She looked back at me. "And neither should you. The Order is . . . well, if they really do exist, then they're not something you'd want to mess with."

That sounded like good advice. "Okay," I said as I followed her toward the hatch. "I'll take your word for it. Thanks for being straight with me. I appreciate it."

Rain paused just before entering the access shaft. "You're welcome," she said, then favored me with a smile. "What are friends for, right?"

TEN

A matter of trust . . . transit to Rho Coronae Borealis . . . Talus qua'spah . . . an indelicate request.

XIV

It took about ten hours for the *Pride* to reach Starbridge Coyote. Time enough for both lunch and dinner in the wardroom, along with a long nap in between. Ted could have cut it in half if he'd ordered the engines to remain at full thrust, but that would have meant spending fuel we might need later. The only person impatient to reach Hjarr was Goldstein, and Ted made it plain that, although Morgan might be the ship's owner, it was the captain who called the shots.

That gave us nearly half a day to kill. Since the *Pride* was on autopilot, there was little reason for Ali to remain at the helm. Regulations called for a flight-certified crewman to be on duty in the command center at all times, though, and Ted, Emily, and Doc all wanted to be relieved. So Ali sat me down at his station and gave me the quick-and-dirty on how to drive the ship. The helm wasn't that much different than those aboard the *Victory*: although the controls were a bit more complex, the thrusters controlling yaw, pitch, and roll were operated by the same sort of trackball I'd learned to use in the Academy.

Ali had already laid in the course for the rendezvous with the starbridge; he told me that Morgan had assured him that, once we were through hyperspace, the hjadd would transmit a signal that would interface with the newly installed nav system and automatically dock the *Pride* with Talus qua'spah. Even so, Ali had taken the precaution of programming an emergency override into the *Pride's* AI; two fingerstrokes on the keyboard, and he could resume control of the helm at any time.

"I don't care what Morgan says," Ali said. "I'm not quite ready to trust the hjadd."

I remembered the way he'd recoiled from Jas when heshe had inserted the code. "With the ship, or anything else?"

A wry smile crept across his face. "Let's just say I prefer to err on the side of caution, especially when dealing with a race that looks like it might possibly eat its young."

I considered reminding him that the hjadd were vegetarians, but decided against it. Nonetheless, I wondered how someone so xenophobic had come to be hired as command pilot for this particular mission. Perhaps the same reason why Goldstein had recruited me; pickings were slim on Coyote when it came to experienced freelance spacers, and Morgan had to settle for what he could find.

Once Ali was confident that I knew what I was doing, he left the bridge to grab some lunch and observe his midday prayers. For the first time

since we'd departed Coyote, I found myself alone on the deck; everyone else had gone below. Through the starboard windows, I could see 47 Ursae Majoris-B as an immense blue and purple disk, its silver-yellow rings casting a broad shadow across its cloud bands. Hard to believe that, little more than ten days ago, I'd been here before, only then aboard a stolen lifeboat. Fate had dealt me an odd hand, to be sure.

I was still gazing at Bear when the deck hatch opened. Looking around, I saw Doc pull himself up through the manhole. Seeing me seated at the helm, he nodded with satisfaction.

"Good man . . . you're at your station." A perfunctory nod, then he reached to his utility belt and unhooked a squeezebulb. "Here's your reward . . . catch!"

He tossed the bulb across the deck. I reached up to snag it from midair. Hot coffee, just what I needed. "Thanks," I said. "Why, did you think I wouldn't be here?"

"Not really, but you never know." Doc closed the hatch, then turned a somersault that put him upside-down to me. "One time, when we were going through the Belt on the way back from Jupiter, the skipper put a rookie on watch during graveyard shift." He tucked the toes of his shoes within the ceiling rail. "I came up here to get something and found him catching z's, with an asteroid only eight hundred clicks off port bow. Stupid kid turned off the collision alert so that it wouldn't interrupt his siesta. Never turned my back on a new guy since."

"If I'd done that in the Union Astronautica, my old captain would've put me out the airlock."

"That kid was Union Astronautica, too." Doc unhooked another squeezebulb from his belt and opened its nipple. "So am I, for that matter."

I'd gathered as much; his accent was *Norte Americano*, from somewhere out west. Which wasn't surprising; I was hardly the first UA spacer to have defected. "Morgan recruited me from the European Space Agency," he went on. "He'd just expanded his company and needed people to build ships for him. After awhile he let me leave the desk and do what I really wanted to do."

"Why the name? This ship, I mean."

"Pride of Cucamonga? After my home town . . . Cucamonga, California. And before you ask, *Loose Lucy* was named after my ex." Doc shook his head. "Word of advice . . . never christen your ship in honor of your wife. Not unless you intend to stay married, that is."

"I take it that's why it's called *Loose Lucy*," I said, and he gave me a rare smile. "Well, I have to hand it to you . . . the *Pride* doesn't look like much, but she flies just fine."

"Looks aren't important. It's how they're built that counts. Only thing I don't like is having to add equipment that I don't know how to operate." Doc scowled as he gazed past me at the black box on the console. "It came to us just as you see it. A few cables in the back, with instructions on how to hardwire them to the console. Soon as we turned it on, though, it interfaced with the main AI bus. But we can't open it, and there's no way for us to change its settings or anything. Only Jas can do that."

I hesitated, wondering whether I should let him in on Ali's secret. Doc

was the chief engineer, though, so it was his job to know what was going on with his ship. "Ali told me he rigged a manual override. Says he can . . ."

"Did he now?" A sip of coffee, then he reattached his bulb to a vest loop and twisted himself until he was rightside-up. "Actually, that's my doing. Ali's just taking credit for it . . . and don't worry, Ted and Emily know about it, too. Just don't let on to Morgan . . . he'd throw a fit if he thought we didn't trust the hjadd."

This was beginning to sound like a familiar refrain. "I take it you don't?"

"Oh, I trust 'em, all right . . . just not with my ship." Another smile that quickly vanished. "Like with you. I have no problem with having a wet-behind-the-ears ensign standing watch, so long as I know you're not going to take a snooze."

"Yeah, well . . ." I shrugged. "Trust seems to be in short supply on this ship."

Doc didn't reply at once. Instead, he regarded me with what seemed to be sympathy. "Son, this isn't the Academy," he said at last. "They do everything by the book, and that way they minimize the risks. Out here, though, the book doesn't apply. We're pretty much making it up as we go along. Especially on this flight."

As he spoke, Doc pushed himself over to one of the starboard windows. "With any luck, this'll be pretty routine," he said, gazing out at Bear. "We deliver cargo, we pick up cargo, we go home. But I'm not going to count on it, and neither should you. So if we don't completely trust the Prime Emissary . . . well, it's because there's a first time for everything, and trust is something you earn only from experience." He reached up to fondly pat the ceiling. "But if you put your faith in this ship, and the people you're working with, then you'll get through this just fine."

If I'd heard that from anyone else, I would've considered it to be hopelessly saccharine. Yet sweetness and light clearly weren't part of Doc's character; he was a pragmatic old spacer who'd been doing this for a very long time. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"Uh-huh . . . well, that's all I have to say about that." Turning away from the window, Doc pulled himself back across the command center. "Okay, kid, the conn is yours. Don't wreck my ship, or I'll kick your ass."

He opened the deck hatch and floated head-first down the access tunnel. The hatch closed behind him, and once more I was alone on the bridge. Yet I found myself remembering something Ash had said to me:

Out here in the great beyond, everything is strange. The sooner you get used to that, the better off you'll be.

XV

Six hours later, we were on primary approach to the starbridge. By then Ali had relieved me at the helm, and everyone had returned to the command center—including Jas, whom Goldstein had escorted up from Deck Three. Doc had installed a specially made couch for the Prime Emissary, into which heshe strapped himherself; I noticed that, although Jas tried to stay away from Ash as much as possible, Morgan traded chairs with his "interpreter" so that Ash was seated next to the hjadd. Funny how even the smallest of coincidences gained significance, now that I knew what was going on.

If Ted was aware of all this intrigue, he paid no attention. "Emcee, open a channel to the gatehouse," he said, keeping an eye on the screens above the control console. Once Emily told him that she'd made contact, he touched his headset mike. "Starbridge Coyote, this is CFSS *Pride of Cucamonga*, requesting permission for hyperspace transition to Rho Coronae Borealis."

A moment passed, then a voice came over the loudspeaker. "Roger that, *Pride. Standing by to receive destination code.*"

"We copy, gatehouse." Ted glanced over his shoulder at his wife. "Send the key, please."

Ali typed in a command that relayed the key code to Emily's station; she transmitted the signal to the gatehouse, which in turn sent it via hyperlink to Rho Coronae Borealis. A minute went by, then we heard from the gatehouse again: "*Code received at destination and confirmed. You have permission to commence final approach.*"

"Roger that, gatehouse. Thank you." Ted let out his breath. "Right, then . . . Ali, interface AI with the gatehouse, then fire main engine on my mark."

Ali tapped at his keyboard, studied his comp for a moment, then looked back at Ted. "Interface completed, skipper. Ready when you are."

"Mark."

A brief surge as the engine ignited. Looking up at the nearest screen, I saw Starbridge Coyote grow in size. Above the console, a holographic miniature of the *Pride* moved toward a three-dimensional funnel that grew from the ring. Remembering the turbulence I'd experienced a few days earlier, I cinched my harness a little tighter, then glanced over at Rain.

"Hang on," I whispered. "This could be rough." She nodded, and gave her own harness a quick yank. Although she said nothing, the perspiration on her face showed just how nervous she was. I remembered then that she was the only person aboard who hadn't made a hyperspace jump; everyone else had gone through this at least once before, if only from Earth to Coyote. "Don't worry," I added. "It'll all be over in just . . ."

"I know, I know." Her voice was tight. "Don't remind me."

She didn't want to be babied, so I left her alone. Ali had taken his hands from the console; now that the *Pride's* guidance system was slaved to the gatehouse AI, there was nothing for him to do. Yet Doc continued to study his board, alert for any signs of trouble, while Ted and Emily watched the comp displays at their stations.

The engine cut off a few seconds later. Another glance at a screen told me that the *Pride* was only a few miles from the starbridge. Any moment now, we'd be entering the event horizon . . .

A sudden flash from within the ring, and then it felt as if we were being pulled into the wormhole. I was about to close my eyes when someone grasped the back of my wrist. Looking down, I was surprised to find that Rain had grabbed hold of me.

"Don't watch," I said quietly, taking her hand. "Just shut your eyes. You'll be . . ."

I didn't get a chance to finish, for at that moment we entered the starbridge.

This time, I saw what happened. Bright light in every color of the visible spectrum streamed through the windows as the command center

turned upside-down, becoming a barrel that some malicious giant had decided to kick down a slope. For an instant, it seemed as if everything stretched, like matter itself had become little more than warm taffy. The holo flickered and went dead. From the other side of the bridge, I heard someone scream—Ash, perhaps, or maybe it was Morgan—and Rain's grip became so hard that I almost yelped.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. The light faded, the spinning stopped, everything resumed its normal proportions. We were through the starbridge.

Rain let out her breath, slowly opened her eyes. "Oh, god, that was . . ." Then she realized that she was still clutching my hand. "Sorry," she muttered, and quickly released it. "Didn't mean to . . ."

"That's okay." I couldn't help but grin. "Any time."

Her face had been pale; now it became red, and she looked away in embarrassment. Hearing the sound of someone retching, I turned to see Ash blowing his cookies into a bag while Goldstein regarded him with disgust. Everyone else was shaken and sweaty, save perhaps for Jas, whose turtle-like visage remained invisible behind the opaque mirror of his helmet.

"Well, now . . . that wasn't so bad, was it?" Ted glanced around the deck. "Everyone all right? No casualties, I hope?" Satisfied that we were all in one piece, if perhaps a little worse for wear, he looked over at his wife. "Send a message back home. Tell them we've arrived in one piece."

Emily pushed a damp lock of hair from her face as she opened a hyperlink channel to Starbridge Coyote. Ted turned back toward the helm. "A fix on our position, Ali, if you will."

Our pilot seemed to shake himself awake, then hunched over the console. It took a minute for him to reactivate the holo and match it against the charts in the comp's stellar catalog. "We're in the HD 143761 system. Approximately one and a half A.U.'s from the primary, one thousand miles from . . ."

His voice trailed off as he slowly raised his eyes to the nearest window. "Allah's blessings," he muttered. "Will you look at that?"

I followed his gaze. Through the window, we could see a nearby planet, oddly Earth-like but with oceans larger than those of our own world. Hjarr, apparently, but this wasn't what got our attention. In orbit above the planet was something that appeared at first to be a small constellation, yet obviously wasn't of natural origin.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rain stared at it in astonishment. "I mean, I'd heard that it was big, but . . ."

Emily put a 3D image up on the holo, and now we could see the object more clearly: a vast, spiral-shaped structure, perhaps two hundred miles or more in diameter, like an elaborate toy cobbled together by some infant god. It slowly rotated upon a central axis, catching the light of a distant sun; all around it moved tiny specks that, I suddenly realized, were starships larger than the *Pride*.

A space colony, but much, much bigger than any built by humans. Even Highgate would have been dwarfed by this thing. I'd heard of it, of course, but in real life it was more awesome than anything I'd imagined.

"There it is . . . Talus qua'spah." Ted looked over at Jas. "Welcome home, Prime Emissary."

"Thank you, Captain." The hjadd had already unfastened his har-

ness, and now floated free of hisher couch. "First Officer, will you please open a channel? The proper frequency has already been programmed into your system."

"Sure." Emily reached to her keyboard. "But what do you want me to. . .?"

"There is no need for you to speak. I will communicate for you." Jas pushed himherself over to the console. "If you will. . .?"

"Skipper?" Ali continued to stare at the holo. "What do you want me to do?"

"Move us away from the starbridge, then hold position." Ted watched as Emily entered commands into her keyboard. "Just wait."

Emily raised an eyebrow, then looked up at Jas. Apparently the Prime Emissary had switched off hisher translator and activated an internal mike, for when heshe spoke again, it wasn't in Anglo but rather the unpronounceable rush of hisses, clicks, and croaks that I'd heard in hisher quarters. A few seconds passed, then from the speakers we heard a response in the same tongue. Jas gave a short reply, then turned toward Ted.

"Our arrival has been acknowledged, and we have been welcomed," heshe said. "If you will kindly relinquish control of your ship, our traffic control system will guide it to the appropriate docking port."

From across the compartment, I saw Ali trade a wary glance with Ted. The captain gave him a wordless nod, and Ali entered a command into his console. "Helm control free," he said, not at all happy about it. "But I don't know how . . ."

A second later, there was an abrupt sensation of lateral movement as the maneuvering thrusters fired on their own, bringing the *Pride* around a few degrees to starboard. "Do not worry," Jas said as heshe returned to hisher couch. "Your ship is quite safe, so long as you do not interfere. All you need do is complete final docking procedures."

"Thank you." Ted looked over at Rain and me. "Right, then . . . you know the drill. Go below and prepare for arrival. We'll use the primary docking port on Cargo Two."

I unbuckled my harness and pushed myself out of my seat. "Do you want us to open the port hatch?"

Ted shook his head. "Not until we get there. Just pressurize the module and wait for us."

"Wilco." Grabbing hold of the ceiling rail, Rain pulled herself toward the deck hatch. "Let us know when you're about to come down."

"Sure." Ted was no longer paying attention to us. Once again, he was gazing out the windows, watching Talus qua'spah as it steadily grew larger. One last glance behind us, then I followed Rain from the command center. She waited in the access shaft while I shut the hatch behind us.

"Is it just me," I said once we were alone, "or does that thing scare the hell out of you, too?"

Rain thought about it for a moment. "No," she said quietly as she pushed herself in the direction of the hub. "It's not just you."

XVI

Although we were supposed to pressurize Cargo Two, standard operating procedure called for us to suit up first. So our first stop was the ready room.

Although Rain and I had made our peace, she still wasn't inclined to

share the compartment while she put on her hardsuit. I wasn't about to press the issue, so I let her have her privacy, and instead pushed myself across the hub to Cargo Two and initiated pressurization. She didn't take as long to suit up as she had the day before, so by the time she was done and I traded places with her in the ready room to put on my own gear, Cargo Two was fully pressurized and we were able to enter it without having to cycle through its airlock. We kept our helmet faceplates open, though, and left our pressure switches on standby.

Cargo Two was divided into four decks, with the marijuana bales securely lashed to grid-like floors. We floated past them as we made our way down the center shaft to the docking port, located at the far end of the module between the cargo hatches. We'd just reached the port hatch when Emily's voice came through the comlink.

"Jas tells us we're about to enter a gravity field," she said. *"You're going to need to find something to hang onto."*

"We copy." There were hand-rungs on either side of the hatch. I grabbed a pair on one side, and Rain held onto two more on the other. "All right, we're ready."

"Very good." A pause. *"On final approach now. We'll be docking in a couple of minutes."*

I was about to respond when Rain gasped. "Holy . . . get a load of that!"

She was peering through the small porthole in the center of the hatch. Moving beside her, I gazed out the window, and felt my breath catch. Past the flanges of the docking collar, several hundred yards away and getting closer with each passing second, we could see a giant, saucer-like construct, just one of the countless subsections that made up Talus qua'spah. As the *Pride* drew near, a dome at the bottom of the saucer opened like a clamshell. Beyond it lay an enormous bay, so vast that the *Robert E. Lee* could have been hangared inside.

"I think we're expected," I murmured. An obvious remark, yet Rain's face was grim as she silently nodded. She was just as intimidated as I was.

Coasting in on little more than its thrusters, the *Pride* slowly entered the bay. Through the porthole, Rain and I watched as the ship glided into the center of a lattice-like cradle, its arms swinging aside to make room for our vessel. There was a hard thump as the freighter came to rest, then a tubular arm telescoped forward to mate with port hatch.

It had just connected with the docking collar when we felt the abrupt tug of gravity, and the airlock suddenly went vertical. Rain and I both swore as we scrambled to find footholds. Fortunately, there was a narrow ledge running around the inside of the hatch that we were able to stand upon.

"All right, we're here," Emily said. *"How are you guys doing down there?"*

Behind us, I could heard the bales shifting against their restraints; now they hung from the decks, which had become bulkheads. "We're okay," Rain said, "but I hope they're able to fine-tune their gravity field. Otherwise unloading is going to be a bitch."

A short pause, then Emily's voice returned. *"Jas assures us this won't be a problem. All they have to do is shut down the field for the hangar. How's the pressure on your end?"*

I turned my head so that I could read the panel next to the hatch. All

the lights were green. "Copasetic," I replied, then I glanced through the porthole. An empty tunnel lay before us, an enclosed gangway illuminated by the *Pride's* external lights. "Waiting for you."

Another pause, then Ted came over the comlink. "*It's going to take us a bit to get things settled here. Go ahead and pop the hatch. We'll be down in a few minutes.*"

"Roger that." The lockwheel was located on my side of the hatch. Hanging on with my left hand, I twisted the wheel clockwise, then put my shoulder against the hatch. There was a faint hiss as it swung open, and I looked at Rain. "Ladies first."

"Oh, no." She shook her head within her helmet. "I insist . . ."

I tried not to laugh. If the *hjadd* had a death-ray waiting for us, we would've known by now. But I wasn't about to make fun of her for being nervous, so I ducked my head and climbed through the hatch.

The tunnel was octagonal, with each surface capable of serving as a floor. For a few seconds, all I could clearly see were the first dozen feet or so . . . then the walls glowed to life with a soft radiance of their own, and now I saw that the gangway extended about forty yards until it ended at a circular door.

"Now what?" Rain entered the tunnel behind me. "Keep going, or wait for the others?"

"We wait." There was no need for my helmet, and I felt foolish wearing it, so I took a moment to remove it, careful to keep my headset in place. "Always let the captain . . ."

Before I could finish, through, the door at the end of the tunnel split in half and slid open. Warm light spilled out into the passageway.

"On the other hand . . ." I murmured.

Rain had removed her own helmet. "You just said we should wait," she said, regarding the door with suspicion. "Now you're saying . . ."

"Hold on a sec." I prodded my headset. "Ted, are you there?"

"Copy. What's going on?"

"We've left the *Pride*, and now we're in some sort of gangway. Looks like it leads to the station, and a door at the far end just opened. I think someone wants us to come aboard." I paused. "Do we stay, or do we go?"

Several seconds passed, then Morgan's voice came over the comlink. "*Jas says that you should continue. An invitation has been made, and it would be considered rude if you declined.*"

Ted's voice returned. "*I concur. We're still in the command center. Go ahead, both of you. We'll catch up.*"

"Roger that." I looked at Rain; she'd heard everything over her own headset. "Well, there it is. Ready to meet the neighbors?"

She still didn't look happy about the thought of doing this alone. We hadn't been given much choice in the matter, though, so we tucked our helmets beneath our arms and headed down the tunnel. I deliberately walked slowly, in order to give Ted and the others more time to join us, but it still didn't take long for us to reach the end of the gangway.

We entered a circular room about twenty feet in diameter, with another round door on the other side. Its walls were featureless save for a set of floor-to-ceiling glass panels that emitted a dull blue glow. Above us was a transparent dome; through it, we could see the *Pride*, resting in vertical

position within its docking cradle. We were still gazing up at our ship when, very quietly, the door slid shut behind us.

"Oh, hell," Rain muttered. "I don't like the looks of . . ."

At that instant, the wall panels lit up, each displaying a different image. A north polar projection of the Milky Way galaxy, overlaid with a halo grid upon which a star near the center of the Orion Arm was circled: Rho Coronae Borealis, if my guess was right. A schematic view of Talus qua's-pah, with a tiny saucer near its outer edge highlighted; hjadd script appeared next to it, apparently meaning YOU ARE HERE. A wide-angle shot of the *Pride*, looking like a bug snared within a spider's web. Vertical bars of hjadd script slowly scrolled upward, significant in some way yet meaningless to our eyes.

I was still gazing at those panels when Rain tapped my shoulder. Turning around, I saw another panel, this one showing a hjadd. Although heshe looked a little like Jas, I noticed that hisher face had a different skin pattern and a slightly larger fin. Heshe opened hisher mouth and addressed us in a series of hisses and clicks.

A pause, then the hjadd vanished, to be replaced by something that looked like a hermit crab, only lacking a shell and with smaller claws. It chirped for a few seconds, stopped and waited for a moment, then disappeared. The next creature was a tall, skinny biped, with backward-jointed legs, arms that nearly reached the floor, and a head that vaguely resembled that of a horse; when it spoke, it gurgled like someone with a mouthful of water trying to tell a dirty joke. Another pause, then it went away, and now we saw something that could have been the Abominable Snowman were it not for four eyes and a tongue that slipped obscenely in and out of its furry mouth.

"I think . . ." Rain studied the panel, her anxiety replaced by fascination. "Maybe this is some sort of reception area."

"You might be right, but I haven't the foggiest what we're supposed to . . ."

The panel suddenly went dark. A moment passed, then a human who looked a little like Ted, except with a shaved head and plucked eyebrows, appeared on it. "*Greetings, and welcome to the House of the Talus,*" he said, speaking Anglo in a voice that didn't belong to our captain. "*You have been identified as human. Please continue to visitor processing.*"

A tinkling sound like wind chimes, then I felt a warm draft at the back of my neck. Looking around, I saw that the second door had slid open.

"Bad manners or not," Rain said quietly, "I really think we should have waited."

"Too late now. We're committed." Besides, I was curious. Rain glared at me, but followed me into the next room.

It was almost identical to the first, except that the ceiling was covered with translucent panels. Low, bench-like tables were placed here and there; cabinets were recessed within the reflective glass walls. The air was considerably warmer as well; about seventy degrees, comfortable without being too humid.

The door closed as soon as we were inside, and once again the not-quite-Ted appeared on a wall panel.

"*This is the decontamination facility,*" he said. "*To begin this procedure, please remove all your clothes.*" ○

(TO BE CONTINUED)

THE VOID WHERE OUR HEARTS USED TO BE

I've seen the best Void Runners of my generation
scarred, vectorless, tired of the emptiness
yet always craving the vastness

who were scrapped like fried jump-drive parts
who are still hooked on those stormy dynamos
those machineries of flight

who bay at the moons the suns the obscuring dust
waiting waiting to be transfixed and spread far
like passengers cryosealed upon a table

and when the change comes
the true weight of the multitude of lives
we have lived and burned will balance to zero

when the change comes
our Klein bottle souls will reinvert,
make revisions to the vain yearnings we contain

and, yes, when the change truly comes
the oxygenating machines in our chests
will shiver in blue-shifted beats

charting us back from all the far neotopias
bridging the void the deserted streets
where our torn-out hearts used to be

—Robert Frazier

SLAN HUNTER

by A.E. Van Vogt &
Kevin J. Anderson
Tor, \$24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-31675-2

This posthumous collaboration is a sequel to one of the most influential books of SF's golden era.

In my case, *Slan* was among the first books I bought when, some time in my teens, I joined the Science Fiction Book Club. I'd read SF before, of course—why else would anybody want to join the book club? But *Slan* was my first taste of Van Vogt's high-energy space opera, and that was all I needed to get hooked.

According to the introduction by Van Vogt's widow, Lydia, he had begun working on a sequel to *Slan* in his late years, but was prevented from finishing it by the Alzheimer's disease that eventually killed him. His widow passed along his various notes and drafts to Anderson, who has completed the story; exactly how much he had to work with is anyone's guess, although a lot of readers will undoubtedly have fun trying to figure out whether this piece or that is Van Vogt's or Anderson's. In my opinion, there aren't any dead giveaways; in other words, Anderson does a good job of making his style blend with Van Vogt's.

The book begins with a young couple on the way to the hospital; the woman, Anthea Stewart, is in labor, and her husband is driving recklessly. The radio has just announced an imminent attack of

slans—superhuman telepaths who represent the next step in evolution. The couple arrive at the hospital in the nick of time, and the mother goes into the delivery room. To the doctor's horror, when the child is born, it has on its head the tendrils that are the mark of a slan—even though both the parents appear to be normal humans!

That's just the first surprise the authors pull out of their hats, and I won't give away any more, since the book, like all of Van Vogt's work, is a roller-coaster ride of plot twists and dramatic reversals.

Jommy Cross, the hero of the original *Slan*, returns, of course. He is an orphaned slan, who has used his powers and knowledge passed down by his father to build superweapons that he hopes will return his people to their rightful place in society. Also here are his great opponents: the title character, John Petty, the head of a government agency devoted to ridding the world of slans; and the tendrillless slans of Mars, who detest both humans and the true slans. It is the tendrillless slans who have launched the overwhelming attack on Earth with which the book begins.

One pervasive element here is a strong feeling that the characters are living in the 1940s—the era when the original *Slan* was written. Smoking is commonplace, sex roles are stereotyped, even the technology seems frozen at that point in time. This is a bit jarring at first. Even after the explanation that the human/

slan wars set society back so far that it has barely managed to reach the level of the forties, it seems strained. The real reason is probably to avoid a disconnect between two books written over fifty years apart—of course Van Vogt was carrying the assumptions of the era into his writing, although they feel dated now. On the other hand, the out-of-period atmosphere may give the book an alien feeling to a younger reader—so possibly it works for a fair fraction of the audience.

But on the whole, Anderson has done a fine job of something more often attempted than successfully accomplished: taking on another writer's unfinished work and completing it without a noticeable clash either in style or conception. If you have fond memories of *Slan*, this one will probably be right up your alley. A fun read.

BREAKFAST WITH THE ONES YOU LOVE

By Eliot Fintushel

Bantam Spectra, \$12.00 (tp)

ISBN: 0-553-38405-5

Fintushel, whose work should be familiar to readers of this magazine, pulls off a tour de force here: a science-fantasy novel with a deep underlay of Jewish mysticism.

The story is told through the eyes of Lea, a young woman best described as street-tough; she tells us from the beginning that she has killed and won't hesitate to do so again. When we meet her, Lea is working as a waitress, and is involved with another character, Jack Komarr, to whom she usually refers as "the Yid." And we learn very quickly that something extremely odd is going on between them.

To begin with, Lea is helping Jack turn a large abandoned showroom

into what he calls a spaceship—but a very odd one, indeed. The ceiling is covered with gold leaf. One wall is covered with identical photos of the great pyramid; another is a "light sponge," darkened and roughened to reflect nothing. Still another is covered with *Playboy* centerfolds. Behind the light sponge is a Sears Roebuck store, which nominally owns the space that Jack is using to build his spaceship.

Jack's explanation for all this activity—which, considering the amount of gold leaf it takes to cover the ceiling of a Sears showroom, is as expensive as it is time-consuming—is simple. If he manipulates the cabalistic symbols that make up his spaceship correctly, he will open a door into another world, and allow a chosen few to escape this corrupted planet.

Lea, despite her street toughness, is curiously naïve, and takes Jack's explanations of his odd obsession at face value. At the same time, she is aware of dangers he seems oblivious of, in the form of gangsters and street toughs who aren't impressed by Jack's mystical vision of a better world. As the project moves ahead, a motley group of characters appear; Jack recruits some of them as helpers, including a few who appear at first to be enemies.

In the end, Jack's plans work out—although with enough twists to surprise even those who think they see what's coming. Fintushel's use of a body of lore with which most readers are not likely to be intimately familiar gives the whole story an appealing exoticism. At the same time, he manages to subvert several currently fashionable SF clichés, without making any great fuss about it. A very deft and highly original performance.

RENEGADE

By L. Timmel Duchamp

Aqueduct Press, \$19.00 (tp)

ISBN: 1-933500-04-2

The second in Duchamp's "Marq'san Cycle" continues the story of a corporate society undercut by what amounts to an extraterrestrial coup. As in the previous book, the focus is on the women of that society, many of whom find themselves for the first time free to run their own lives.

The major action of this book revolves around Kay Zeldin, who at the end of the previous book, *Alanya to Alanya*, broke away from the government's head of security, who had recruited her to infiltrate the aliens' headquarters where a group of human women are being trained to build cooperative, non-hierarchical societies. Here, Duchamp gives us a look at some of the growing pains of such a society in the Pacific Northwest, the Free Zone, and the attempts of the old corporate society to regain hegemony.

A large number of scientists, including Kay's husband, have gone missing, apparently at the hands of the former government. Hoping to find word of her husband, Kay leaves the Free Zone to search for clues to the disappearance. By sheer coincidence, in an unguarded moment, she falls into the hands of her former government superior's private assistant, Elizabeth Weatherall, who is now effectively in charge of the state security apparatus.

Kay is taken to the Rock, a top-security government base built into a Colorado mountain, where Elizabeth begins a program to make her submit again to authority. Elizabeth eventually hands over much of the job of tending to Kay to her own assistant, Allison—a bright young woman who takes for granted the privileges she

gets as a cog in the authoritarian regime. But watching Elizabeth's handling—or rather, mishandling—of Kay has an unintended effect: Allison is gradually radicalized both by Kay's resistance and by her growing awareness of the plight of the working-class women around her.

By the end of the book, Allison is on her way to becoming as strong a renegade as Kay—and the corporate society has again demonstrated its fundamental flaws. Even so, the book concludes with the oppressive forces seemingly on the comeback. Duchamp resists the temptation to give the reader a feel-good ending, focusing instead on the struggle against oppression. She also keeps the sfnal elements in the background, giving the aliens only a few brief appearances. Liberation will not be achieved by a resounding blow delivered by a superior outside power but by a long, uphill struggle on the part of the victims themselves.

Not an easy or reassuring book, but a very intense one. Well worth seeking out.

THE GAME

By Diana Wynne Jones

Firebird, \$11.99 (TP)

ISBN: 0-14-240718-9

Jones's title works two ways; not only do her characters play a fascinating game that spans entire universes, but she herself is playing a game with modern characters who play roles defined for them by classical mythology.

We meet the protagonist, Hayley, as she is being packed up for a trip to an out-of-town relative. A number of other young family members are expected to be there, many from her generation. Surprisingly, she has not previously met any of them, having been brought up in a home isolated

from the outside world and governed by strict grandparents. In fact, Hayley has been sent to the big house in Ireland because of her involvement with a couple of characters of whom her grandmother disapproves, Flute and Fiddle, who apparently have magical powers.

But if her grandparents think that a trip to Ireland will remove Hayley from bad influences, they are mistaken. Almost at once, she is given clothes more suitable for rough outdoor play than the flowered dresses her grandmother has packed. And the other children—all her relatives—involve her at once in a curious game, a sort of scavenger hunt that spreads beyond the ordinary confines of space and time into what the children call the mythosphere.

Hayley is at first timid—she has spent very little time with other children, let alone anyone quite as uninhibited as most of her cousins appear to be. It's clear that the game is in some sense forbidden; her cousin Tolly keeps threatening to tell the adults on them, although he takes part in the game once they all begin.

It quickly becomes apparent to the reader that the objects of the scavenger hunt are rooted in lore that ranges from fairy tales to classical mythology. Hayley's first quest is for a scale from the dragon in the zodiac; another character is sent to fetch one of Cinderella's slippers. The children return to the game day after day, until a crisis arises in the form of Uncle Jolyon, a formidable elder who evidently frowns on the children stepping beyond the mundane world.

In the end, Hayley finds her own place in the mythosphere, while defusing Uncle Jolyon's attempts to end the game. Jones smoothly blends mythology with the convincingly

recreated world of children at play when the adults aren't looking over their shoulders. The result is a story that, while aimed at a YA audience, will strike a note with many adult readers as well.

AN UNEXPECTED APPRENTICE

By Jody Lynn Nye

Tor, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-765-31433-9

Nye, a veteran writer who's touched most of the bases in our genre, offers a fantasy that pays tribute to the usual models, but marks out a territory very much her own.

The story begins traditionally, in a pastoral setting that will undoubtedly evoke many others in fantasy—the Shire is probably the most famous example. The protagonist, Tildi Summerbee, is a young woman of a race that is human in form and abilities, but of small stature.

As the story opens, Tildi is in the kitchen of the family home, preparing a meal for her brothers, who are out working in the fields. Out of the blue, the workers are attacked by thraiks, demon-like flying creatures, and her brothers are killed or carried off. This is the second time her family has fallen victim to the thraiks, her parents having been killed some years before.

Tildi quickly realizes that the traditional society of her village has no way to accommodate an orphaned female with a large inheritance except to find her a husband, whether she wants one or not. So she sets off to claim another kind of inheritance: the apprenticeship to the great wizard Olen that her brother had earned. Perhaps by impersonating him, she can help fulfill his destiny. And after all, she has some small magical talent of her own.

The journey to Olen's home in the human city of Overhill takes Tildi through several adventures. But the wonders begin upon her arrival, when the wizard accepts her and begins training her. Before she has gotten far along, a crisis arises, which brings together ambassadors from many parts of the world. An important magical item has been taken from where it has been hidden to prevent its misuse. A book that gives the exact magical name for everything in the world, it allows the user to manipulate reality by changing those names. A company must be assembled to find the book and return it to safety.

Not surprisingly, Tildi—who has come into possession of a leaf copied from the book and seems attuned to its use—is one of the chosen. With her go several others: a pair of wizards, mother and daughter; a pair of warriors; and several others who know the lands and peoples among whom they are to travel. Interestingly, only one of them—one of the warriors—is male, and he is severely handicapped, apparently by the trauma of an earlier magical battle.

The quest that follows, and the various ordeals the company goes through, are well paced and sufficiently original to distinguish this epic fantasy from what has become an extremely large subgenre. Nye manages to make her characters something more than variations on familiar types, and she has a nice sense of humor—a welcome antidote to the tendency of much fantasy to take itself too seriously.

In fact, there is an air of geniality about much of the book, even though a lot of the plot places the characters in decidedly unpleasant circumstances. Tildi, like Sam Gamgee, is a

down to earth character in spite of her magical talent and tragic loss. This gives her a sense of inner strength that is only occasionally challenged by her doubts about whether she is really worthy to take on the magical role her brother should have had.

Most readers will have figured out before the end of this book that it is the first in a series, and that a lot more will have to happen before the major plot problems are laid to rest. But Nye delivers a satisfactory climax to this segment of the plot, and leaves the characters in a sufficiently interesting situation that a lot of readers will want to see what happens in the next installment.

THE NEW TIME TRAVELERS

A Journey to the

Frontiers of Physics

By David Toomey

W.W. Norton, \$25.95 (hc)

0-393-06013-3

Nowadays, physicists are taking time travel seriously. About time, a veteran SF reader might grumble. For one example, see *Time Traveler* by Dr. Ronald L. Mallet, reviewed in this space several months ago.

Toomey's book is another sign of the trend: a survey of the ways several eminent modern physicists have devised to make the dream of time travel at least a theoretical reality. Interestingly, Mallet's work doesn't figure in this book—so the field is even wider than Toomey's treatment indicates.

After paying tribute to fictional treatments of time travel, Toomey zeros in on its scientific pedigree. Not surprisingly, much of current theory arises from Einstein's relativity theories, in particular the effects of rapid travel or strong gravitational fields in slowing the passage of

time for those who experience them. This obviously allows one sort of time travel, to the distant future—well beyond the life expectancy of the time traveler. But that's just an accelerated version of what each of us is already experiencing. And since it's a one-way trip, there's no chance to go find out who wins next year's Kentucky Derby, or what Microsoft will be selling for in fifteen years, and then come home to cash in on the knowledge. On the other hand, it might allow someone with a terminal illness to reach an era when effective treatments have been discovered, which would certainly be attractive to many people.

Other types of theoretically possible time travel fail on the ground of being "unphysical:" i.e., they violate some property of physics. For example, the Dutch physicist Willem Jacob van Stockum, who died in World War II, came up with a time travel device involving a rotating cylinder of infinite length. Most interestingly, such a device would allow travel into the past—which would let the traveler benefit from knowledge of things to come. But while the math checks out just fine, the infinite cylinder can't exist in the universe we know.

In the absence of infinite cylinders, some physicists have tried to find more plausible engines to drive their time machines. One of the best-known examples was developed when Carl Sagan, writing his novel *Contact*, wanted to come up with a plausible mechanism for time travel. He asked Caltech physicist Kip Thorne for suggestions. Sagan had thought of using a black hole, but Thorne told him that a black hole could only offer a one-way trip: not what Sagan wanted. Instead, he suggested a wormhole, a shortcut through space that can be deduced from general rel-

ativity (although nobody has ever detected one). A paper published in 1988 summarized his conclusions, although Thorne is reportedly reluctant to talk about the subject because of the sensational publicity it has generated.

Toomey goes on to examine time travel explorations by a number of highly respected physicists, among them Stephen Hawking. The list is long, and includes visits to such esoteric theoretical ground as string theory, the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum theory, and the anthropic principle. Two especially interesting chapters conclude the book: one advancing explanations for the apparent absence of time travelers in the present day, the other exploring whether far-future time machines might be used to escape the heat death of the universe.

One apparent limitation of time travel is that no theoretical mechanism seems to exist for travel to a time before the machine is turned on. Since no working time machine is known to exist in the present day, that would eliminate some of the most interesting fictional uses of the time travel phenomenon, such as preventing Hitler's rise to power, or giving your younger self advice that would have changed your life. But Toomey points out an obvious loophole: that all that's really necessary is for some society elsewhere in the universe to have developed time travel at a sufficiently early time. Then the problem switches to overcoming the light speed limitation on how fast someone from Earth can get there to use it.

A solid dose of physical theory, recommended for anyone who'd like to use time machines in fiction without violating the known principles of science. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The climax of the fall convention season comes in October and November, with weekend events from coast to coast. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2007

- 12-14—**AngliCon**. For info, write: Box 75536, Seattle WA 98175. Or phone: (206) 789-2748 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) anglicon.com. (E-mail) info@anglicon.com. Con will be held in: Seattle WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the SeaTac Hilton. Guests will include: none announced at press time. British media SF and fantasy.
- 12-14—**CapClave**. capclave.org. Hilton, Silver Spring MD (Washington DC). Author Jeffrey Ford, editor Ellen Datlow.
- 12-14—**ConStellation**. con-stellation.org/constell. Holiday Inn, Huntsville AL. A general SF and fantasy convention.
- 12-14—**ICon**. mindbridge.org/icon. Clarion, Cedar Rapids IA. Author C. S. Friedman, artist Larry Price. SF/fantasy.
- 12-14—**ValleyCon**. valleycon.com. Best Western Doublewood, Fargo ND. W. Shatner, Duane & Morwood, Wurtz, Maltz.
- 12-14—**ConCept**. conceptsff.ca. Days Hotel, Guy St., Montreal QE. Huff, Weber. Programming in French and English.
- 13-14—**Ireland National SF & Fantasy Convention**. octocon.com. In Ireland, probably in the greater Dublin area.
- 19-21—**BakuretsuCon**. bakuretsucon.org. Burlington VT. For anime fans.
- 19-21—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest**. ovff@ovff.org. North Dublin OH. SF and fantasy folksinging ("filksinging").
- 26-28—**MillieHCon**, Box 487, Westminster CO 80036. milliehicon.org. Hyatt Tech Center, Denver CO. General SF/fantasy.
- 26-28—**NecronomiCon**, Box 2213, Plant City FL 33564. stonehill.org. Hyatt Downtown, Tampa FL. General SF/fantasy.
- 26-28—**HallowCon**, c/o 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. hallowcon.com. Chattanooga TN.
- 26-28—**Cult TV**, Box 1701, Wolverhampton WV4 4WT, UK. (+44) 01733-205009. festival@cult.tv. Birmingham UK.

NOVEMBER 2007

- 1-4—**World Fantasy Con**, Box 1086, Schenectady NY 12301. lastsfa.org. Saratoga Springs NY. Newman, Ermshtwiler.
- 1-4—**Con on the Cob**, 372 Alpha Ave., Akron OH 44312. andhopp.com. Quality Inn, Kent OH. Adventure, SF, fantasy.
- 9-11—**PhilCon**, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. philcon.org. Sheraton City Center. Eric Flint. World's oldest SF con.
- 9-11—**WindyCon**, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (847) 310-0725. windycon.org. Rosemont (Chicago) IL. Huff, Weiskopf.
- 9-11—**TusCon**, Box 2528, Tucson AZ 85702. (520) 571-7180 (fax). home.earthlink.net/~basfa. InnSuites. SF/fantasy.
- 9-11—**AstronomiCon**, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-4697. astronomicon.info. SF/fantasy convention.
- 9-11—**Eastern Media Con**, Box 60623, Staten Island NY 13106. easternmediacon.com. Airport Ramada, Newark NJ.
- 9-11—**NovaCon**, c/o 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. (0114) 281-1572. novacon.org. Quality, Bentley, Walsall.
- 9-11—**ArmadaCon**, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead PL3 5HL, UK. (44 0 1752) 267-873. armadacon.org. Plymouth.
- 16-18—**OryCon**, Box 5464, Portland OR 97228. orycon.org. Waterfront Marriott, Portland OR. R.C. Wilson. SF/fantasy.
- 16-18—**Anime USA**, Box 1073, Herndon VA 20172. animeusa.org. Sheraton, Tysons Corner VA (DC area).
- 23-25—**LosCon**, 11513 Burbank Blvd., No. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 760-9234. loscon.org. Los Angeles CA. Sawyer.
- 23-25—**EmpiraCon**. empiracon.com. Eastern Washington State. General SF and fantasy convention.
- 23-25—**ChamBanaCon**, Box 2908, Springfield IL 62708. turkey@chambanacon.org. Hilton. Very-low-key relax-a-con.
- 23-25—**Darkover**, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. darkovercon.com. Holiday Inn, Timonium MD. M.Z. Bradley fans.

AUGUST 2008

- 6-10—**Denvention 3**, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. denvention3.org. Bujold, Whitmore, McCarthy. WorldCon. \$130+.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY ISSUE

Asimov's January 2008 issue is just the tonic for your winter doldrums (not to mention that lingering depression you are surely feeling now that our thirtieth anniversary year is over). To begin with, we offer a story set most definitely on the sunny side of life, written by two of the science fiction field's most original and daring thinkers. **Rudy Rucker** and **Marc Laidlaw** take us down to Surf City, following the story of three oddball soul surfers as they hunt down "The Perfect Wave"—a wave that can only be found within the virtual zones of a surfing video game gone completely haywire. This one's got Slack to spare, so take notice!

ALSO IN JANUARY

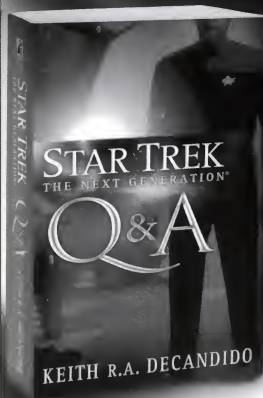
January features yet another installment of **Allen M. Steele's** popular *Galaxy Blues*. As you just read in this issue, Jules Truffaut stepped into the unknown on the Talus qua'spah. Things get even more difficult to handle in part three, "The Fool's Errand," when Truffaut must act as unwitting ambassdor to the Hjadd—with varying results! Will Jules cause an interstellar incident? Keep reading and find out! We continue with a story sure to strike the same nostalgic chords that propelled Tim Pratt's "Impossible Dreams" to the top of our Readers' Award poll last year: **Mike Resnick's** bittersweet stroll through "Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders"; **Tanith Lee** returns to our pages with her haunting examination regarding the effects of a terrifying plague upon "The Beautiful and Damned by F. Scott Fitzgerald"; new writer **Will McIntosh** makes his *Asimov's* debut with a wise and witty story about some of life's more "Unlikely" occurrences; and **Deborah Coates**, whose "Chainsaw on Hand" inspired much discussion on our lively internet Forum, offers her latest, a heartbreaking tale of the emotional costs paid by "The Whale's Lover."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

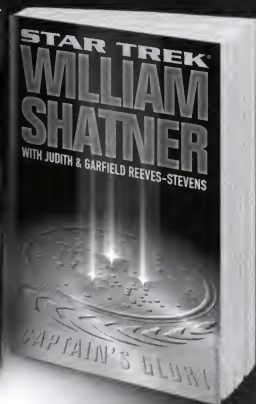
In his "Reflections" column, **Robert Silverberg** tells the tale of his uncovering a very special "Aladdin's Cave"; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net column explores the mysterious cabal known as "SFWA"; **Paul Di Filippo** offers "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our January issue at your newsstand on November 13, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, (www.asimovs.com)—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

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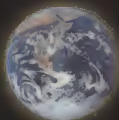
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